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IN THE KING'S FAVOUR

THE LOST LAIRD

BY

J. E. MUDDOCK

Author of "Stripped of the Tinsel," "Without Faith or Fear," etc.

Some Press Opinions.

Daily Chronicle.—"Mr. Muddock has caught the spirit and temper of the times with success. His story is well and simply told."

Birmingham Post.—"The spirit, rapid movement, and invention of this story will secure interested readers."

Madame.—"The Rebellion of the young Pretender is a subject loved of writers of historical novels, and no wonder, for it is a subject full of romance and possibilities. 'The Lost Laird' belonged to this period, and the story of his disappearance and return is of much interest. The central figure is Janet, a devoted Scotchwoman, a consistently drawn and fine character."

Westminster Review.—"The Lost Laird' is by no means the least interesting of Mr. Muddock's stories."

Public Opinion.—"The story has many thrilling incidents which are related with much earnestness, and the characters are vigorously drawn."

To-Day.—"Janet's character and that of her self-sacrificing lover Kenneth would alone make the book worth reading, for they are both impressive and natural."

People.—"It is full of incident, and the interest is well sustained."

Glasgow Herald.—"An interesting and at times exciting tale."

Newcastle Chronicle.—"The achievement of the book is its study of genuine Scottish character. Altogether a strong and thoughtful novel."

Scotsman.—"The story may be well recommended to the many readers to whom the sad closing annals of the Royal Stuarts never becomes wearisome."

Sheffield Daily Telegraph.—"It takes no little talent to invest with fresh interest so well-worn a theme as the romance round the fortunes and misfortunes of 'Bonnie Prince Charlie,' but Mr. Muddock in this book has been singularly successful in his work, and he presents a striking story, which carries the reader along, and sustains his interest from the pathos of the opening chapters to 'the joy that cometh after the storm' in the last."

Dundee Advertiser.—"There is genuine pathos in the story, which will be admired by those having Jacobite leanings."

Western Morning News.—"The story is full of exciting incidents. Mr. Muddock handles his subject well. His characters are all skilfully pictured, and his scenes are admirably described."

Leeds Mercury.—"It is a wholesome and well-told romance of very interesting times, and will be enjoyed by those who prefer such to be the fin-de-siècle novel of the problem type."

Bradford Observer.—"The Lost Laird' is written with skill and power. The author shows a wealth of invention in devising the vast number of incidents with which the novel is crowded."

Liverpool Courier.—"The book, all through, teems with thrilling episodes."

Belfast News Letter.—"The book is decidedly agreeable from every standpoint, one which must unquestionably enhance the author's reputation."

Illustrated London News.—"By readers of the class which enjoy 'Ben-Hur' and kindred tales, the adventures of Janet will be followed with pleasure to their conclusion."

Manchester Courier.—"The excellent combination of character and circumstance, typical of the people and the time, renders this story vigorous and interesting, and one that the reader will appreciate."

Aberdeen Journal.—"The story is most powerful and dramatic, and there is not a dull page from cover to cover."

LONDON: GEORGE BELL & SONS.

DONOVAN, Dick (pseud)

IN THE KING'S FAVOUR

A ROMANCE OF FLODDEN FIELD

(Dick Donovan)

BY

J. E. MUDDOCK

AUTHOR OF

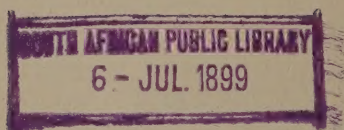
*"For God and the Czar," "Stripped of the Tinsel," "Without Faith
or Fear," "The Lost Laird," &c.*



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IN THE KING'S FAVOUR

CHAPTER I

AT THE HOSTEL OF THE LION

ON New Year's Day, 1513, the town of Edinburgh was visited by a snowstorm of such severity that nothing like it had been witnessed before within the memory of living man. While the storm was at its height six travellers were approaching the town from the south, and struggling stoutly to make headway against the fierce blasts of wind that drove the snow against them in great, blinding sheets. The travellers were all mounted, and although they were not in military dress, there was something about them that at once proclaimed them to be soldiers. Two rode abreast in front, and the others, who were serving men, and heavily armed, rode some little distance behind. Each horse was a perfect specimen of its kind, being of a celebrated Flemish strain, then much in vogue, and coal black in hue.

The foremost riders were a middle-aged and a young man; and the striking likeness between them at once proclaimed them to be father and son. They wore long riding boots, with formidable rowels, which every now and again they dug into their horses' sides to compel the poor animals to face the driving snow and roaring wind. Each man was clad in a heavy cloak that was

closely wrapped about his body; and his hands were encased in massive gauntlets of untanned leather, while on his hip he bore a heavy sword. Their broad-brimmed hats were pressed hard down over their brows, almost completely concealing their faces. The men were expert riders, and managed their horses with consummate skill; in fact, had it been otherwise, it is certain they must have been thrown from their saddles, for the animals exhibited great alarm at the thick swirling snow, and the shrieking blasts of wind that swept down from the hills with terrific fury.

"By my faith but this is devil's weather," exclaimed the elder of the two men riding in front, as his horse pirouetted completely round, as an unusually strong blast came howling over the hills. "If this storm had but delayed its coming for two hours, we should have been at our destination ere now."

"Ay, sir, in good truth we should," answered his companion, "but now methinks the gates of the city will long be closed before we reach them."

"If we could find shelter on the road we would complete our journey to-morrow's morn, and make no further attempt to fight this gale," returned the other. As he spoke he suddenly wheeled his horse round, and shouting to the foremost of the little troop behind, he cried—"David, ye know this road well; how far are we from the city now?"

The man thus addressed was a tremendous fellow, almost Herculean in his proportions. He wore heavy jackboots, and his massive chest was protected by a jerkin of untanned leather. On his hip he carried a two-edged sword, and at his belt was a long knife in a leather sheath. Slightly reining in his powerful steed, he made a military salute and answered—

"A long league yet, Laird."

"Then by my father's bones methinks we shall have to make our bed on the road side an this hell broth storm continues," the Laird remarked with a hoarse growl.

"Nay, if it please you, Laird," returned the man, as he made another salute, "we will fare better than that. The hostel of the Lion is hereabouts, and mine host, Geillie Duncan, shall give us of his best when he knows that it is Sir Hugh de Burgh who demands his hospitality."

"You suggest well, and yet——" Sir Hugh de Burgh turned to the younger man, his son, and said—"What sayest thou, Robert? Push we forward to the city to-night or make our quarters at the hostel of the Lion? David the Raven, I warrant me, will see that we are well cared for."

"I am for the Lion, an it please you, sir," returned his son. "I warrant me he is a more peaceful beast than this storm, that roars as if it would devour us."

"Ho! for the Lion, then," exclaimed Sir Hugh; "but mark me, David," addressing his man again, "mine host—what name did you say?"

"Geillie Duncan, if it please you, my master."

"Then, this same Geillie Duncan must know us not, nor our mission. Mark you that. These hostelkeepers are aye gossips and spies, and we must not furnish them with food for their vulgar tongues."

"My duty is to obey your commands, Sir Hugh," answered the man, as he made another respectful salute and fell back into his place again, and the little cavalcade once more resumed its journey.

The night was deepening fast, and the storm gave not the slightest indications of abating. The road was lonely and drear, and the driving snow made it difficult for the horsemen to find their way. At length David the Raven, who was evidently well acquainted with the country, was ordered to lead, and in a little while he halted before a large house, from whose windows streamed lights, and from whence issued the sounds of boisterous revelry.

"The Lion, Sir Hugh," said the man, as, dismounting and thrusting his arm through his horse's bridle, he

walked up to the door and commenced to hammer on it with the butt end of a heavy dagger that he drew from his belt.

"The Lion seems to be in a merry mood," Sir Hugh remarked.

"Ay, sir," answered his son, "but it's ill luck that drives us to spend the New Year's night amid these vulgar roysterers."

"Nay; say not so, boy. We shall find adventure and entertainment here that will make the night hours speed pleasantly, I warrant me."

"For my own part, I confess, I should have preferred the hospitality of Holyrood," replied the son, but little dreaming how prophetically he spoke, when he remarked that it was *ill luck* that drove them to spend New Year's night amid the vulgar roysterers.

"God's truth," exclaimed his father, gruffly, "despise not the best that offers itself. Better this hostel than the road and snow on such a night."

"But better still the palace," insisted his son.

"Pshaw," returned his father, "better a cot with a welcome, than a palace with a frown. I go to make my peace with His Grace, the King, but by St. Becket's bones I swear that the King would rather that my head were carried to him on a pike staff."

Possibly in this surmise, Hugh de Burgh was not altogether wrong, for he had long set the King at defiance. Hugh was the descendant of a powerful border family that had always refused to acknowledge fealty to the Sovereign, although in the border wars it had often rendered good service to the Kings of Scotland. The De Burghs had come over with William the Conqueror, and long afterwards managed to establish themselves in the border country. Sir Hugh had passed a less eventful life than many of his ancestors, but still his career had been exciting enough in his stronghold known as the "Eagle's Nest," on the shores of the romantic and dark Loch Skene. He had married early,

his wife being his own cousin and a woman of singular beauty. She bore him three children, a girl and two boys, and when about to present him with a fourth, died suddenly, the result of a shock received by the blowing up of part of the castle during an attack made upon it by some English freebooters who had crossed the border. The death of his lady was a great blow to Sir Hugh, but as his daughter grew in beauty and years, a good deal of his ruggedness was softened down, though the independent spirit which was so characteristic of his family was hard to conquer, and on two occasions he had refused to render King James service when called upon. For this he had been each time summoned to Edinburgh, but pleading illness as an excuse for not obeying the summons, he had sent his youngest son Robert, in his stead. His eldest son had at this time gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. At last a peremptory command to appear at Holyrood and swear allegiance to His Majesty, or failing to do so, an army was to be sent to reduce his castle and take him prisoner, had caused him to think it were better to obey the lawful commands of his King. And so leaving his daughter at his castle under the care of her aunt, he had set out with his son; for in compliance with the King's order he was to bring his son with him, and come accompanied by four retainers only, who were to carry no more arms than were sufficient for their protection on the road. He had, however, selected four of his very best fighting men, their leader being a man of renown. He was known by the soubriquet of "David the Raven" from the blackness of his hair and eyes and swarthy complexion. He was born under Sir Hugh's roof, and had been carefully trained in the use of arms. In stature he was a perfect giant, standing over seven feet in his stockings, and his strength was prodigious. He had figured conspicuously in many of the border raids, and his massive body bore witness, in the shape of numerous scars, that he had seen hard

fighting. He had the courage of a lion, but like most big men was good-tempered and generous, though there had been times when he had shown he could also be singularly cruel. He had frequently visited Edinburgh, consequently knew the country well. Of Robert de Burgh it is necessary to say, that he was a singularly handsome youth of about three-and-twenty, but utterly unlike his father in temperament. He pined and chafed for the luxury and pleasure of a town life, for his nature inclined to voluptuousness, and the wild solitude in which his home was placed was irksome to him. The warlike spirit which was his father's did not seem very strong in the son, although at times he had given evidence of conspicuous courage, and that he knew how to defend his rights. He too, had frequently been to Edinburgh, and whenever he returned from these journeys he seemed more restless and dissatisfied. He was a proud youth, and aimed at leading a court life. It can therefore be imagined that he looked with satisfaction on the present journey, and secretly rejoiced that at last his father had been compelled to yield to the King's bidding, and repair to the great city that to the young man's imagination appeared to be the very Paradise of youth. Handsome, well-proportioned, and with a winning grace in his presence, he had been flattered and spoilt by the opposite sex, until he had come to believe that he had only to look at a woman, to cause her to fall down and worship him.

David the Raven continued to hammer at the door of the hostel for some time, without getting any response, until, losing his temper, he cried—

“By the Holy Mother, an ye open not the door. I'll make a key of bullet and powder, and open it for ourselves!”

“The churls are revelling,” muttered Sir Hugh, “and care not for benighted wayfarers.”

“But we'll make them care,” answered David, as he once more thundered on the door with the butt of his

pistol, and, his impatience seeming to communicate itself to his horse, the beast neighed loudly, and pawed the snow with its hoof. In a few moments, the laughter and shouting ceased inside the house, and a voice from behind the door demanded to know—

“What noisy carl is it that seeks admission into a decent man’s house, with so much clamour?”

“Your betters, sirrah,” thundered the Raven. “Two travellers of high degree and their escort want shelter and refreshment for themselves and beasts. And now that ye’re answered, Geillie Duncan, open your door and confess yourself a miserable sinner, for having kept your superiors so long on the outside, on a night like this, when e’en a mangy dog might fairly claim shelter.”

At this demand, the massive door was flung wide open, and a flood of light streamed out on to the snow-covered figures of the travellers and their steaming horses.

The landlord stood in the doorway holding a flaring pineknot above his head. He was a burly man, with purplish face and portly and massive frame. He bowed low as he said—

“Your pardon, my masters, but I thought all honest folk would be in the bosom of their families on a New Year’s night. We have to be careful too in opening our doors after nightfall, for there are many lawless characters about, and an honest man’s house is no safe against them. But enter, my good masters. I give you welcome. My hostel is filled with guests and friends, but the best I have is at your service.”

Soon all was bustle and excitement. The horses were led round to the stalls in the courtyard, and David and his men set about cleaning them down, while Sir Hugh and his son were ushered into the great guest chamber of the inn.

The ceiling was crossed with massive beams that were black with age and smoke, and hanging from the beams were rows of dried sea fowl, haunches of deer,

and gammons of smoked boar. On the huge hearth-stone blazed a cheerful fire of logs, and the projecting chimney arch was adorned with many polished cooking utensils, mingled with rude weapons of war. For in those lawless times every man had to be prepared to defend himself should the need arise.

There was a motley gathering in this great kitchen, for being New Year's night the landlord's friends from far and near had assembled. There were stalwart youths and pretty wenches, and a sprinkling of old people, whose grey hairs and feeble steps told how near they were to the closing scenes in the dramas of their lives. Ponderous oak settles and tables were ranged around, the latter being covered with good cheer in the shape of smoked boar's head, venison pasties, wild fowl, and sundry other birds, together with foaming jacks of ale and beakers of usquebaugh. On these viands and potables Sir Hugh and his son were invited to fall to, an invitation that needed no repetition, for the men were ravenous after their long ride in the storm, and so with keen appetites they commenced the attack, and did not cease until nearly an hour had sped. Then feeling that their doublets had grown all too tight for them, they retired to a settle in the chimney corner, and the dancing, that had been interrupted by the entrance of the guests, was resumed.

The Hostel of the Lion, being the only one for many miles, was much frequented, and on two occasions, when hawking in the neighbourhood, His Majesty King James and his retinue had availed themselves of the hospitality of the inn and partaken of its frugal fare. Owing to this fact, coupled with the rude independence of its landlord, the house had acquired some fame. But what gave it still greater attraction in the eyes of certain people, was the beauty of mine host's daughter. Alie Duncan was about twenty years of age, and possessed of a perfect form and face. A face upon which nature seemed to have expended all her skill in endeavouring

to make it attractive. Her complexion was fair and pink, and she had eyes as soft and liquid as a fawn's, while her light brown hair, when shaken free from its bands, completely enveloped her to her feet.

No wonder that as a rustic beauty she had numerous admirers; admirers too far above her own station in life. In fact many-tongued rumour had whispered that the King himself had been stricken by her charms and that disguised as a woodman, he had more than once secretly visited her to make his devotions at the shrine of her beauty. Alie herself, however, had indignantly repudiated this, so it was highly probable that it was the mere idle invention of some vulgar gossip.

She was an only daughter, and the sister of seven brothers, thus it would seem she had an ample body guard to protect her against the inclinations of those gallants who thought a pretty rustic maid fair game for their alluring snares. At this time, however, there were only five of the brothers at home, as one had been taken prisoner by the English during a border raid, and the other—the youngest—was apprenticed to a gold-worker in Edinburgh. These brothers, with the exception of the youngest, who was weakly, were conspicuous for their prowess and manliness, and sharing some of their sister's good looks, they were the cause of many a maiden's sighs.

Alie was devoted to her brothers, and they were devoted to her, so that in all the country side there was no happier or more peaceful home to be found than the hostel of the Lion.

Notwithstanding her numerous admirers, and an inclination on her part to coquettishness, Alie Duncan had a genuine lover who sighed his heart away for her, and whose suit she somewhat favoured. His name was Malcolm Laing, he was the only son of a widowed mother, who was the owner of a small farm in the neighbourhood. Malcolm was three-and-twenty, and not without a share of good looks. It is true that

many a better favoured youth had tried to win Alie's heart and failed, while Malcolm had made good progress. That he loved her, was a fact known all round the country side; indeed it was said that he worshipped the very ground she walked upon.

Alie, her lover, her five brothers, and many young friends were present on this eventful New Year's night, when the raging storm without drove Sir Hugh de Burgh and his party to seek the shelter and protection of the hostel.

At first Robert de Burgh held aloof from the merry company, which he considered so far beneath him in social rank, that his dignity was at stake. But soon the spirit of gaiety affected him, and when Geillie Duncan, the host, asked him to join a dance, and accept Alie Duncan as his partner, he readily assented. He had heard of Alie's beauty, for its fame had spread even to the wilds of Loch Skene, but, until that night, he had never seen her. Now as he rose and took her well-shaped hand, and gazed into the liquid depths of her beautiful brown eyes, his blood grew hot, and sinister designs entered his head.

"By'r lady sweet, mistress," he exclaimed with enthusiasm, as the dance ended, "but you foot it gracefully as well you may, for one so brawly favoured as you could scarcely fail to dance like a sylph."

"Good sir, you do but flatter me."

"Truth is not flattery," he said. "But tell me your name, so that I may know how to address you?"

"They call me Alie."

"Alie! How sweet! and appropriate to your own fair self."

"Oh, sir."

"I do but speak my mind."

Alie was susceptible to flattery, and felt proud of the patronage this gentleman was bestowing upon her. Her vanity often secretly led her to sigh for high estate, and there had been times when she had even dreamed

of obtaining a noble lover. Her silly little heart was now beating wildly, her face and temples were burning, and she was racking her brain to guess who this gallant was. That he was a noble was plain from his dress and his style of speech. He had drawn her into a recess of the great room, where they were partly concealed from the rest of the people. Holding her hand, he raised it gracefully to his lips and kissed it, and, bending his head a little, whispered—

“Might I dare hope to win one favour?”

“Sir!” she exclaimed with some dignity, and looking at him with flashing eyes, as she realized that by allowing him to talk thus she was compromising herself; for was he not an utter stranger, and such language from a stranger boded no good?

“Nay; be not angry,” he said. “I fain would—”

He was interrupted in his speech by a young man, who, coming hurriedly from the centre of the room, pushed him rudely aside without a word, and then, taking Alie’s arm, said with smothered anger—

“I like not this fooling with a stranger, Alie. Come, come away.”

The young man was Malcolm Laing, her acknowledged lover. He was flushed with excitement and drink. Alie, feeling confused and ashamed, was obediently yielding to his command, but seizing him with a rough hand, Robert de Burgh twisted him round, and placing himself between him and the girl, while his whole manner and bearing indicated rage and scorn, he exclaimed—

“Churl and dog. On your knees and sue for pardon or your miserable life shall pay the forfeit of this insult.”

“Churl to yourself,” cried Malcolm, drawing himself up proudly. “Come not between me and that maiden, or by St. Anthony an you were the King himself I would strike you down.”

He made an attempt to brush past his opponent and seize the now trembling and frightened Alie, but Robert,

whose pride was hurt and dignity wounded by being thus addressed by a vulgar plebeian, as he was pleased to think him, gave him a buffet in the face which for a moment made him stagger.

The altercation had by this time attracted the attention of all in the room, and especially of Alie's brother's, three of whom were then present. There was instantly a rush for the recess, and the brothers, grasping the situation with the quickness of instinct, ranged themselves on the side of Malcolm, who, with a cry of fierce anger, drew a dagger from his belt and aimed a blow at his antagonist, that would certainly have taken effect, had not Alie, with a scream of deadly fear, thrown herself forward, and by knocking his arm on one side, diverted the aim.

"Ah! De Burgh to the rescue,"* cried Robert, forgetting in his excitement his father's wish to remain unknown.

Instantly the room was in a wild uproar. Daggers were drawn, falchions seized, and angry cries rose on all sides; for at this time there was intense bitterness and ill feeling between the upper and the lower classes, the latter being always quick to espouse the cause of one of their number without ever waiting to inquire whether he was right or wrong. Before the anger of the mob however, could display itself in any other way but shouts of defiance, a stalwart figure pressed through their ranks, scattering them like chaff, and in another instant David the Raven, with a drawn dagger in his hand, and looking like an incensed giant, stood beside his young master, scowling defiance at the threatening people, while his three men, together with Sir Hugh were behind with drawn swords. The threatening attitude of the crowd so alarmed Alie that, with a cry of fear she clasped her hands to her breast and fell fainting to the floor. It is certain that at this critical

* The rallying cry of the De Burgh.

juncture, blood would have been shed, for Malcom Laing and the brothers of Alie showed every disposition to fall upon Robert, and beat him in spite of the threatening attitude of the giant David, who certainly in fair fight was a match for any three men in the room; but seeming the alarming nature of affairs, Geillie Duncan, the host, sprung on to a settle, and in a loud voice cried—

“Shame on you! my masters and friends. Put up your weapons, remember it is New Year’s night—and more than that, you are my guests: therefore respect the hospitality I have accorded you.”

This appeal, delivered in earnest, commanding tones, had its effect, and the quarrellers, although somewhat suddenly, did put up their weapons, and then the females present gave attention to the insensible Alie, and carried her from the room.

The Raven was rather sorry that matters had ended so peacefully. He was essentially a fighting man, and loved to exert his powers on some worthy foe.

“We shall meet again!” Malcolm Laing murmured under his breath to Robert de Burgh as the latter moved away.

Robert took no notice of the threat, for, no doubt, he felt that he was in the wrong. As the festivities were now quite broken up, Sir Hugh drew off his men, and together with his son retired for the night. And very soon the light from the smouldering logs upon the hearth fell upon a motley group of figures stretched in slumber upon the floor—some with blocks of wood and some with targets, for pillows, and some with nothing at all: while all looked singularly picturesque in the crimson glow from the expiring fire.

CHAPTER II

A LOVE SCENE AND AN INTERRUPTION

THE night waned away and the morning broke bright and fine, with clear, crisp air, and a very low temperature. The storm of the previous day had completely snowed the country up, and for miles and miles nothing was to be seen but a monotonous stretch of white, broken only by the still, stony-looking trees or an occasional farmhouse.

The guests at the Lion were astir betimes, and there was much bustle and noise consequent on the preparation of the morning meal—which was a formidable thing in those days—and the departure of those who were going forward to Edinburgh. In order that there might be no chance of a renewal of the last night's quarrel, Geillie Duncan had been careful to keep his personal friends and the other guests apart. The fame of Sir Hugh de Burgh's daring and independence was wide spread, and Duncan knew well that offence given to so powerful a man, would be certain to bring down swift and dire revenge.

Malcolm Laing was sullen and fretful. His spirit was wounded from the effects of the blow he had received, and being essentially a plebeian, his hatred of the De Burgh—who represented the nobility was the more intense. He had entered into a league with the five brothers of Alie Duncan, and it is quite certain that had the slightest opportunity occurred, the quarrel would

have been renewed. Sir Hugh, however, who was very adverse to a feud with these common people, took good care to keep his little force well together and under his own eye. But there was one who was by no means inclined to take any special care to avoid a conflict. This was Robert, who was burning to get speech again with Alie before he left, if it were at all possible. Consequently, he kept on the watch, and wandered about restlessly as if searching for something he had lost. As the time drew near for departure he began to despair of accomplishing his purpose, until suddenly he caught sight of the rustic beauty as she crossed the courtyard and entered the byre with her milking pail. Without a moment's hesitation, he hurried after her, and going into the byre was rejoiced to find that she was alone.

"Ah! sweet Mistress Alie," he said, as taking off his plumed bonnet, he bowed low. "The live-long night I have dreamed of those beautiful eyes, until I felt it was not possible to depart without once again speaking to you."

Alie, whose silly vanity was pleased by this attention, was by no means averse to a little mild flirtation with a De Burgh, for she knew that the family was a great, powerful, and wealthy one, and she believed that her beauty was quite worthy of notice, even from one so far above her in social rank. Nevertheless she flushed deeply, and hanging her head said softly—

"Good sir, you do me a wrong. Remember I am but a humble peasant girl, and you are a rich noble."

In these words she unconsciously, or perhaps unintentionally, uttered a great truth and had she but recognised the importance of it, she might have saved herself many a future pang, for in very deed he did her a wrong in even noticing her. But she was like the silly moth that flutters round the flame of a candle; she was fascinated in spite of the danger.

"Love levels," he answered, drawing closer to her.

"Hush, you must not speak of love," she exclaimed quickly.

"And wherefore not?" he asked.

"I have a lover already, sir."

"Pah! A vulgar clod."

"But he is to be my husband," she exclaimed, trembling a little as the very words reminded her of the risk she was running, and the wrong she was doing to the man whose wife she had promised to become.

"Your incomparable beauty might well justify you in aspiring to a prouder position than that of the wife of a vulgar pleb," Robert said insinuatingly as he tried to take her hand, but she drew back and kept her eyes on the ground.

Her face burned, and she experienced some sense of indignation as she heard her lover thus spoken of, yet there was pleasure even in the pain, for she liked to be flattered, and thought it was so nice to be taken notice of by the scion of such a family. She meant no harm poor girl. She was only silly and weak and ignorant. Like all women of her class in those days, and even of those far above her, she had no learning, and knew nothing of the world beyond her own door, so to speak.

Robert, no doubt, was perfectly well aware of this, and recognising the pliable material he had to work upon, felt tempted to press his suit and win the girl. To do him justice, however, it is more than likely that at this moment he had no more serious intention than to while away a pleasant half-hour in talking soft nonsense to this exceedingly pretty young woman, whose face had fascinated and whose voice had charmed him. As well they might, for the young man who could have gazed into her glorious eyes and listened to the musical ring of her low, sweet voice unmoved, must have been cold indeed. But even if he had more serious intention he would only have been acting in accordance with the spirit of the licentious age in which he lived.

"You should not speak so slightly of him who is

to be my husband," she said with slight warmth, as though she really was indignant.

"Your husband," Robert answered with a sneer. "Can it be possible that one whom Nature has favoured as she has favoured you, is reserved for no better fate than to become the slave of a common tiller of the soil. Start not, sweet mistress, for well you know I speak a great truth. The wife of such a man is but a drudge and slave. A hewer of wood and drawer of water, whose life is a round of ceaseless toil."

Alie felt very uneasy. Her conscience told her she was wrong in listening to such words, and yet full well she knew they were but facts, for a poor man's wife was more often than not, merely the poor man's slave.

Yet had it not been for that fatal gift of beauty, she would have been content to have accepted the position and done her duty as a wife, whatever her lot might be; but men had talked poison to her, it had sunk into her being, distorted her views and warped her mind, so that she had asked herself over and over again, why should she not be a grand lady, for many a grand lady was not half so beautiful as she?

"It is even as you say," she murmured, but directly the words had left her lips, she felt as if she could bite her tongue off for having uttered them.

Robert saw the effect he had produced, and, following it up, said—

"Could I but win your regard, I would be faithful and true to death."

These words seemed to arouse her to a sense of her position, and with a woman's quickness she recognised that the power at present was in her own hands. Drawing her figure up, and looking at him now full in the face, she said, a little scornfully—

"What seek you with me, sir? Would you win my love but to sport with it, and when I cease to charm, fling me away."

"No! By the saints, no!" he answered.

"What, then?" she demanded, still looking fixedly at him. "You are a great gentleman—I but a humble girl, the daughter of a poor hostelkeeper. Between you and me there is a wide breach. How would you bridge it?"

He was cowed somewhat, and felt that she had driven him into a corner; yet his admiration for her grew, the hot blood of his youth muddled his brain.

"I would make a fine lady of you," he said, speaking confusedly. "I would give you jewels and servants, and a palfrey to ride upon, and those shapely hands should know no harder work than that of caressing your silken spaniels."

She smiled contemptuously as she asked.

"And should I enjoy these things as your wife, good sir?"

He started as if he had been struck, and a crimson blush of confusion and shame spread itself over his face. Scarcely knowing what he said, he stammered—

"As my wife?"

"Ay, sir, and wherefore not? If my love is worth the winning, then am I fit to take my place at your side as your wife."

"My wife you could not be," he murmured, feeling perfectly abashed.

"Shame on you!" she cried, with startling indignation, that made him shrink away. "Your family may be great and noble, but you unworthily represent them. The man I have chosen for my husband will at least respect my honour, but you seek to trample upon that which an honest woman holds more precious than life."

"Nay, sweet mistress," he began, thinking to propitiate her.

"I am not your sweet mistress, sir. Leave me this instant, for your presence insults me."

He felt that the girl had treated him as he deserved, and he was quite ashamed of himself. But her force of character also struck him, and raised in him a spirit of true admiration.

"Be not angry with me," he said, "for on my knees I will sue for pardon. Let me press your hand to my lips in token that I am forgiveness."

"You have my forgiveness, but such token is not necessary," she said proudly, for she saw that she had triumphed, and her woman's nature rejoiced.

"Will you give me no hope?"

"Hope of what, sir?"

"That I may win your love."

"To win my love, to befool me! No, Sir."

"You do me grievous wrong, Mistress Alie," he cried, with warmth, as his passion led him away. "I would win your love as a something to prize and cherish as long as I live."

"Fair word, fair words, but lightly spoken," she answered with scorn.

"No, on my soul."

"Hush. Perjure not that which is immortal."

"By heaven! then, and you think I am not true. I swear to make you my wife," he cried in a burst of enthusiasm, and perfectly fascinated by her sweet winsome way, as well as by her dazzling beauty.

"Your wife!" she said with emphasis, while her heart throbbed with a new born joy.

"Ay, my wife!" for you are fit to take your place by the side of the highest lady in the land."

"Oh, sir, trifle not with me," she murmured in trembling accents.

"I am no trifler. Say that your love shall be mine, and I will marry you."

She was breathless and excited, and the place seemed to swim around her. Could this be real, or was she dreaming? Were her longings to be satisfied at last; and were the secret wishes of her heart to be gratified?"

"Do you know what it is you are saying?" she asked in a dazed way.

"Ay. I am pleading for your love."

"A plea that might find response, and you sought that

love honourably." She hung her head now, and blushed again.

"Do I not seek it honourably? I tell you that you shall be my wife."

"And do you speak truly?" she asked breathlessly.

He drew himself up proudly, and raising his hand aloft, he placed the other on his heart, and said solemnly—

"On the unstained honour of a De Burgh I swear it."

He grasped her hand, and she made no attempt to withdraw it. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," she faltered.

"And you will love me?"

She lifted her head, and gave him her other hand, and as he held her, she looked him full in the face, and with tears in her eyes, said—

"I will try to love you with all my heart and with all my soul. Faithful and true I will be to you while life remains, if you make me your wife, and you have sworn to do so on your honour."

He drew her to him, and pressed burning passionate kisses on her fair face, and she in the ecstatic bliss of the moment felt like one who dreamed a ravishing dream. But the dream was rudely interrupted as the door was flung violently open, and trembling with passion and white with rage, Malcolm Laing stood before them, a drawn dagger gleaming in his hand.

CHAPTER III

AT HOLYROOD

Malcolm Laing's sudden and unexpected appearance in the byre caused, as can well be imagined, the greatest consternation to Robert de Burgh and Alie Duncan, the latter shrinking away with deadly fear, for conscience smote her and told her that she had done wrong.

Malcolm was livid. Blinding passion had taken hold of him, and a frothy spittle stood upon his lips. His eyes were full of fierceness, the muscles of his face and throat worked with convulsive twitches, the veins in his temples and hands were distended until they looked like whip cords.

There was something so menacing in his look and manner that, fearing mischief, Alie instinctively threw herself between the two men.

"You marsh adder," Malcolm growled furiously as he spurned her away. "Through yon window I witnessed how false and deceitful you are. I curse you and kill you."

He made a desperate lunge with the dagger at her breast, but, with the quickness of thought, Robert sprang forward and caught the descending arm, in time to avert what otherwise must have been a fatal blow.

Like a hyena at bay Malcolm turned upon his opponent, and roared out—

"Traitor, coward, toad, I spit at you." He suited the action to the word, then with a wild spring fastened his

left hand on his rival's throat, while with his right, he raised the dagger, and was about to plunge it into Robert's heart, when his arm suddenly fell powerless to his side, and the weapon clattered on the stones. Then with a great groan that ended in a gasp and a gurgle, he pitched forward on his face, and the blood gushed from a gaping wound in his breast.

Accustomed and trained to the use of arms as Robert was, he had drawn his dagger when he saw how matters stood, and with a quick, sudden, and skilful blow, had driven it deep into the bosom of his luckless antagonist as he made the spring.

The whole of this ghastly drama had taken not a minute to enact, and now the unhappy youth Malcolm Laing was weltering in his blood, and his life was fast ebbing away.

Robert wiped his dagger on some hay that was near, and restoring it to its sheath, he spurned the prostrate body of his foe with his foot, and muttered with great bitterness the word "dog" between his closed teeth. Then he gave his attention to Alie, who, almost petrified with horror, was crouching on her knees, and covering her face with her hands.

"Come, sweet," he said, as he raised her up. "This is no place for you. Trouble will come out of this wretched affair, but we cannot help it. The fool brought his death upon himself. Come, heart of mine, dry those tears."

He removed her hands, but instantly she buried her face in his breast and sobbed piteously. He led her to the door, but before opening it, said—

"Cease this wailing, sweet one, and remember your vow. You have sworn to love me."

"And you have sworn to make me your wife," she answered between her sobs.

"Aye, that have I, and I will keep my oath. Be you but true, and I will send for you when I return from Edinburgh."

She allowed him to press his lips to her lips, and then without daring to look at the prostrate form on the floor, she passed out of the byre.

Very coolly Robert crossed the courtyard to the stalls where the horses were stabled, and looking in he cried—

“What ho! the Raven there.” In an instant David appeared. “In yonder byre,” Robert said, “lies the body of a man I have slain. I slew him to prevent his slaying me. Is my father astir?”

“Aye, Master Robert, this good hour and more, and his impatience has grown great at your absence.”

“Good, saddle the horses then and let us away.”

David the Raven exhibited no surprise. Border raids had familiarized him too well with scenes of lawlessness and bloodshed, for him to be surprised at such a small matter as that of his master having slain a man with whom he had quarrelled. The almost invariable ending of a serious quarrel in those days was an appeal to the sword or the dagger, and the death of one or both of the combatants. Therefore the Raven only shrugged his shoulders at the event, and probably hoped that a little skirmish would arise, in which he might prove the redoubtable prowess of himself and his well trained men.

Alie had retired to her chamber, and Robert went into the hostel, where he met his father, who chided him for having delayed the setting out; and he demanded to know the cause that had detained him.

“A trifling affair,” Robert said carelessly, “which as your obedient son, I shall do myself the honour of recounting as we journey on our way.”

In another moment David blew lustily on his horn, as a signal that all was ready for the start.

Then amidst much bustle and clatter and clang, the little cavalcade formed up before the hostel door, and after much bowing on the part of mine host, and when the stirrup cup had been partaken of, Sir Hugh de Burgh and his followers resumed their journey.

They proceeded for some distance in silence. The

snow lay deep and cautious riding was required. Moreover Sir Hugh was sullen, for his pride was wounded, as he thought that the way in which he was approaching the city was unbecoming his station, and that he ought to have ridden with a noble retinue, and with pennons flying, and burnished arms glittering in the sun, instead of with a beggarly escort of four men.

Seeing the humour of his father, Robert was reluctant to tell him of the tragedy, and Sir Hugh seemingly was so absorbed in his own thoughts, as to forget to question his son further as to the cause that had detained him.

As the little party thus rode on and drew near the gates of the city, Robert pondered on what had occurred and came to take a far more serious view of the matter than he did at first, for he could not fail to see that it was calculated to involve him in much trouble, and very probably even bring him within the meshes of the law. Moreover, now that his passion had subsided, and he could think rationally, he began to fear his father's anger, for nothing could have happened more inauspiciously, inasmuch as being on his way to make submission to the King, the sad event might be the means of keeping him from the King's favour, in fact, bring down upon him His Majesty's anger. Looking at it in this light, Robert foolishly resolved to keep the matter a secret for the present at anyrate, and on an opportunity arising, he whispered his intention to the Raven, and cautioned him against speaking of what he knew.

On reaching the boundary of the town they were summoned by blast of bugle to halt, being armed men, and state their business. Sir Hugh held a passport bearing the King's sign manual, and this having been inspected by the guard, they were allowed to pass through the fortified gate and proceed on their way, and in due course arrived at Holyrood Palace. Here Sir Hugh was received with all the ceremony and formality befitting his rank, and he and his son were lodged in a sumptuous apartment.

The fatal event of the morning caused Robert, now that he came to reflect in a sober manner, considerable uneasiness, but he consoled himself with the belief that the matter might be hushed up, and that the news of Malcolm's death would not spread very far.

On the following day Sir Hugh had audience with the King, and in the presence of many noblemen swore allegiance to His Majesty. When this ceremony was over, Robert had the honour of kissing the King's hand and was most favourably received, for King James was an affable monarch, and treated with great kindness those who served him. The audience being over, Sir Hugh and his son were dismissed for the present, and subsequently were requested to join the personal suite of the King, who on the morrow was going to pay a visit to the Palace of Linlithgow. The King at this time was halting between two opinions, as to whether he should make war on England or not. His wife, Queen Margaret, who was the sister of Henry VIII., King of England, was living at the Palace of Linlithgow. His union had been celebrated in 1504, with great pomp and rejoicing, for it was thought that it would cement a bond of friendship between the two countries. Large sums of money were paid to the Scottish King, and many were the pledges and vows that were made, vows alas! that were doomed to be speedily broken.

The marriage had not been a happy one, and at this time the Queen lived in solitary state at Linlithgow, whither occasionally the King condescended to go. His consort was much opposed to war with England, and she had a large and powerful party on her side. She used every opportunity that presented itself to endeavour to dissuade her royal husband from embarking in any rash adventure, and predicted that if he threw down the gauntlet to England it would be a woeful day for Scotland.

Scarcely two years before, Queen Margaret had presented her lord with an heir, whereat there was tre-

mendous rejoicings and fêtes on a scale of magnificence scarce ever equalled; while to commemorate the event, the King built an enormous war-ship which he named the Michael. She was manned by three hundred sailors, carried a hundred and twenty gunners, and a thousand other fighting men.

This had been a bone of contention between himself and his Queen and those who held her views, for she felt sure that such tremendous preparations for war boded no good to the State. But her husband was stubborn and determined. He knew that Henry VIII. of England was involved in a quarrel with the King of France; and James believed that England would be so sorely crippled and denuded of troops, that a more favourable opportunity to strike her could not happen, and that a great victory for Scotland was a foregone conclusion.

In consequence of the warlike spirit thus displayed on the part of the King, the realm of Scotland was in a very disturbed state, for a vast number of people, some of the highest in the land, amongst whom was good Queen Margaret herself, were of opinion that after the covenant made between the two countries, war with England would be dishonourable, and lead to certain ruin.*

This then was the state of Scotland at the time that Sir Hugh de Burgh, one of the most powerful of the

* In 1504 James IV. of Scotland was married to Margaret, daughter of Henry VII., and sister of Henry VIII. of England. His marriage was made the occasion for the most solemn covenants being entered into between the two monarchs, that neither should invade the others' kingdom. Margaret brought her royal husband a great amount of wealth, and it was hoped that an era of lasting peace between the two realms had dawned. These hopes, however, as everybody now knows, were doomed to be blighted before many years had sped away, according to the historian Lambe, King James was "of a majestic countenance of a middle size and a strong body." He was capable of bearing extraordinary fatigue, and excelled in all manly sports. He was passionately fond of horses and a splendid judge of them. He was skilled also in the art of curing wounds. In manner he was courteous, affable and of a lively disposition.

border nobles, was summoned to Holyrood to take the oath of allegiance to the monarch.

As already mentioned, Sir Hugh had hitherto maintained his independence, and it was certain that he treasured no great love for the King, for at the marriage with Margaret, Sir Hugh had not been invited through some cause or other; he had looked upon this as a deadly insult, and up to this time had refused to swear allegiance and in all probability he would not have done so now, had it not been for a quarrel he had had with his brother about the ownership of the Eagle's Nest, on the shores of Loch Skene. To strengthen his position therefore, Sir Hugh felt that it was politic to make his peace with the King.

The morning that had been fixed for the visit to Linlithgow was the third of January, when the King had determined to pay his New Year greetings to his Queen, as well as spend some time in devotion at the church of St. Michael. The weather had cleared up, and a bright sun was shining as the gay cavalcade set out from Holyrood. The quaint and curious old town of Edinburgh, with its queer jumble of houses, its dark wynds, and its formidable castle bristling with cannon, was relieved of its usual sombreness by the brilliant sun, which shone upon its many windows, until they looked like burnished plates of copper. On the North Loch a crowd of people were enjoying themselves upon the ice; and through the narrow streets of the crooked city, dense throngs surged backwards and forwards, for the New Year festivities were still being kept up. Many of the shops were closed, their owners having abandoned themselves to the revelry of the hour. Laughter and jest and coarse wit filled the air. Soldiers and civilians mingled together; chairmen with their burdens elbowed their way with difficulty through the densely packed streets; caddies and beggars jostled with their betters. Around the Cross, loungers of all ranks idled away the time; some were dressed in stately

attire, and wore swords at their sides, with richly jewelled handles. At many of the street corners were stalls for the sale of Cappie Ale and round these stalls merry groups were congregated.*

Presently there arose a cry of "The King! the King." As it was known that His Majesty was to ride through the town on that morning, banners and trappings had been hung out, and all the *forestairs* were covered with carpets, upon which gaily-dressed lords and ladies sat, many of them being muffled in costly furs. In a little while the cavalcade moved slowly by, being preceded by the King's bodyguard, clad in polished armour, and armed with formidable pikes and battle-axes. Then with a "gentleman at arms" on either side of him, rode the King, his horse being a magnificent black charger gaily comparisoned with scarlet silk and cloth of gold.

His majesty was a powerfully-built man of middle height, his well-knit frame giving indications of great muscular strength. His hair and beard, which were of a dark auburn, were trimmed short. He had keen hazel eyes and a handsome face, upon which, however, seemed to sit a constant look of melancholy. On his head he wore an embroidered cap with a massive plume. Over his shoulders hung a cloak of crimson-pile velvet trimmed with ermine. His collar was brodered with jewels, and on it was the royal badge of Scotland. His long boots that came over his white buckskin breeches, were crimson leather with Vandyked tops! while his spurs were polished steel inlaid with gold. Pendant from his belt was a richly jewelled dagger on the one side, and on the other a long and keen rapier.

Following him came a great company of ladies and gentleman, all magnificently attired, and mounted on superb horses. Amongst these ladies and gentlemen were Sir Hugh de Burgh and his son, the latter riding

* *Cappie Ale* was sold in little wooden bowls. It was a thin kind of beer with brandy in it and was a favourite drink with the common people. The better classes drank claret.

side by side with a most beautiful young girl of about eighteen, the Lady Beatrix Thirlstane, a Maid of Honour at the Court of James.

This young lady was an orphan, the daughter of an English soldier of fortune who had been taken prisoner by the Scotch. His wife came to the Scottish Court to plead for his release, but she came too late, for one night in attempting to effect his escape he had been shot down by the guard. His unhappy widow was so shocked at this, that, being very near her confinement, she gave premature birth to a child, and a few weeks afterwards died broken-hearted. As the relations could not be discovered, the King issued orders that the child should be carefully nurtured and brought up in the Palace, where she had since remained. She was a delicate, fragile creature, but exquisitely beautiful, and the King had formed the secret design of making her the wife of young Robert de Burgh.

Following this noble company came another troop of stalwart guards, armed with pikes and Lochaber axes, and as the stately cavalcade slowly made its way through the city, the vast crowds cheered themselves hoarse, and the Castle cannon thundered forth a Royal salute. As soon as the town was left behind and the open country reached the horses were put to the trot, and the brilliant, glittering throng swept gaily along to the stately Palace of Linlithgow.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE KING'S FAVOUR

THERE were gaiety and feasting in Linlithgow that day, and the night was passed in wassail and mirth, for in spite of the sorrow that was ever present with James, and of the iron belt he wore around his body on account of the part he had taken in the death of his father; no one loved pleasure more than he.

For once the grim old Palace was resplendent with light and beauty, and poor Queen Margaret, stepping out of the shadows that for ever environed her, enjoyed a few brief hours of Lethean pleasure.

The great hall was dazzling with hundreds of lamps; the court jesters kept the company in a roar; and numerous minstrels discoursed sweet music, while the merry dancers tripped it blithely on the polished floor, the King apparently the lightest hearted of the lot.

Young Robert de Burgh's acquaintance with Lady Beatrix Thirlstane had improved since the morning, and it was noticed that she was his partner in several dances. Presently he retired with her to a deep recess, where, sitting on a buffet at her feet, she tuned her harp at his request, and then in a low, sweet, silvery voice—she murmured a touching ballad that dealt with the faithlessness of a lover, and the pathetic death of his mistress, who gradually pined away.

"You sing with a charming tenderness, fair lady," he said, "and here could I sit and listen to the music of your voice until the sun rises on to-morrow."

"Pray, good sir, speak not idle words."

"Nay, my lady, I do not speak idly, for I swear by the stars that your voice is the sweetest thing that ever mine ears have heard. But I like not your ballad, for such a faithless lover could not be."

"Fie, fie upon you, sir," she cried, prettily. "You speak not with a due regard for accuracy."

"Nay, an I swear——"

"Hush, make no rash oath. Men are ever ready to *swear* to anything when in ladies' company. But they are all false and all deceivers."

"Ah, that you would allow me to redeem my sex from that heavy libel," he said, pointedly.

She understood his meaning, and blushing to the very roots of her golden hair, she bent low over her harp, pretending to adjust a string, but in reality to hide her face, so that he might not see the tell-tale blush.

"Sir David Lindsay, the Lion-Herald, tells me that you come with your father from near the border, and he gives me good report of you," she said, after a pause, and as if she had not gathered the meaning of his words.

"Sir David does me honour," he answered, with a bow. "Fain would I stand well in your sight. My father is lord of the Castle of Eagle's Nest, on Loch Skene, and we have come to pay our devotions to His Grace the King. And surely Fortune has smiled upon me since she has allowed me to bask in the light of your eyes, e'en though it be but for a too brief space."

"You mock me with your wordy compliments, sir," she replied in answer to his last speech. "Methinks the light of my poor eyes is not equal to many another lady's to whom you have said sweet things."

"You do me wrong, Mistress Beatrix." This is all he could say for the moment, for her words had caused him to remember Alie Duncan, and the vow he had made to her that she should be his wife.

"I believe you not, sir," she exclaimed, with a little laugh, and an apparent indifference, yet secretly she

was pleased, for she knew that it was highly probable that owing to her dependent position, she would never get a husband, unless by the King's commands; and, judging from what the waiting woman had told her that morning, she guessed with feminine quickness that the King intended this young man should pay his court to her.

Robert looked up into her sweet face, that was all aglow with suppressed excitement and maiden modesty, and her witching beauty held him spell-bound. After a pause, he asked—

“What can I do, sweet ladybird, to prove my sincerity and truth?”

“Nay, I cannot guide you, good sir,” she answered, with a pretty pout. “I have heard ladies who ought to know say that men are not to be trusted. But alas!” she added with charming artlessness, “I am but a silly and simple maid, and know not what to think.”

There was something so engaging in her manner, so ingenuous and childlike, that in spite of himself, Robert was captivated; but there came to him again thoughts of Alie Duncan, and he cursed his folly for having been so precipitate and headstrong as to pledge himself to her.

He was like a man who had suddenly awakened from a dream, and he wondered how he could have been so blind as thus to compromise himself. Truly, he seemed to have flung the substance away, for the sake of clinging to the shadow. Lady Beatrix noticed his troubled looks and said—

“There is a cloud upon your face, and your thoughts seem far away. Have I offended you by my silly chatter?”

“Nay, lady mine,” he cried, as, sinking on his knee with the grace of a courtier, he raised her white hand to his lips and kissed it. At that instant he was startled by a voice exclaiming with a merry laugh—

“By our faith, young sir, but thou makest love like unto one who is well versed in the art.”

He sprang to his feet confused and shamed, and turning beheld the King, to whom he made the most humble obeisance. His Majesty was in company with many of his courtiers, including several ladies, and his interruption of the *tete-a-tete* was by no means an accident. He had for some time kept his eye on Robert, although from the position of the recess, it was screened from the greater part of the room; but James had been moving about as was his wont at these festive gatherings, and he was most punctilious in hardly ever allowing any of his guests to depart without his having said some familiar word to them, for he was an affable and generous prince, and liked to mingle with his subjects. On the present occasion he was personally interested in watching Robert's movements, and all unknown to the young man, he had passed and repassed the recess, chatting and joking with those about him, until at the moment when Robert bent his knee the King deemed the opportunity too good to be lost.

"An it please your Majesty," Robert stammered forth in answer to the King's remark. "I did but sue to the Lady Beatrix for pardon for that I had been absent-minded—"

"Sirrah!" the King exclaimed in mock anger; "surely thou hast been guilty of a grave offence. An thou couldst be absent-minded in the presence of one so fair, thou art unworthy of a lady's notice."

"Nay, your Majesty, an it please you blame him not," said Lady Beatrix, coming to his rescue. "Let your anger fall upon me. Light and frivolous words that I had uttered set him pondering, and when I chided him, then did he sue to me for pardon."

"Oh! oh!" laughed the King merrily; "but this is an interesting confession. I pray you note, my lords and ladies, that the gentle Lady Beatrix champions this graceless gallant. By our royal word, sirrah, we are half inclined to condemn thee to perpetually bask in the light of this fair lady's eyes, by giving her to thee to

wife, since thou hast so forgotten thyself in the presence of such beauty."

The Lady Beatrix hung her head to hide the burning blushes that mounted to her temples ; while Robert, all trembling and confused, bent his knee to the King, and bowing low as he touched with his lips the hem of His Majesty's robe, said—scarcely knowing what the words were he uttered, and wishing that the floor would open and swallow him out of the King's presence—

"Your Majesty pays one so humble as myself too great a compliment, and an undeserved honour."

The King, unpremeditatingly, drew his sword, and touching the kneeling man on the shoulder, said—

"Arise, Sir Knight, henceforth we take thee under our especial care, and thou shalt be attached to our Court." Then after a slight pause he added significantly, "A Knight by his oath binds himself to be true, honest, and upright, and to accord his protection to a woman in distress. Look to it, Sir Knight, give no woman a chance to speak ill of thee, and in God's name, we charge you, betray no woman."*

This honour at the hands of the King was so utterly unexpected, and as Robert knew only too well, so

* The learned historian Brande says that "when the order of knighthood was conferred with full solemnity in the leisure of a court or city, imposing preliminary ceremonies were required of the candidate. He prepared himself by prayer and fasting, watched his arms at night in a chapel, and was then admitted with the performance of religious rites. Knighthood was conferred by the *accolade*, which, from the derivation of the name would appear to have been originally an embrace, but afterwards consisted, as it now does, in a blow with the flat of a sword on the back of the kneeling candidate." Monarchs, however, frequently created knights without any ceremony on battlefields and elsewhere, therefore there was nothing unusual in King James taking advantage of all the circumstances which lent themselves so readily to the occasion, and creating Robert de Burgh a knight in his own right, on the spot. Robert had frequently been to the Court on behalf of his father, therefore he was personally known to the King, who, being well aware that he was a younger son, was anxious, it may be supposed, to make him equal in rank to Lady Beatrix, whom he was particularly desirous of seeing married, in order that she might have a protector in the event of his own death.

utterly undeserved, that the youth was overwhelmed, no less with surprise than at the remembrance of the unlucky chance which but three days ago had caused him and his father to seek shelter at the hostel of the Lion. That chance, he felt, had destroyed him. For even if the death of Malcolm Laing could be hushed up, and it was not impossible, it might be by payment of a sum of money, he would still have to reckon with Alie Duncan, and the vow made upon his honour that he would marry her.

Still feeling as if he were in a torturing dream he kissed the royal hand, and in faltering accents said, "I shall ever be your Majesty's devoted, faithful, and humble servitor. But this gracious mark of your royal favour has found me all too unworthy to receive it."

Taking this for natural modesty and youthful bashfulness, the King was pleased with the speech, and answered with his pleasant laugh—

"Thy lady waits thee, sir knight, to lead her to the dance. See well that she has no occasion to chide thee again under pain of our royal displeasure." So saying the King and his followers moved away, leaving Robert standing there so dumbfounded that his brain was in a whirl, and he saw the brilliant throng, the glitter of lights, the waving banners, and the flash of jewels in kaleidoscopic confusion, until he was only recalled to a realisation of his position by a gentle touch on his arm, and the silvery voice of Lady Beatrix in his ear—

"I' faith, sir knight," she said, "the honour His Grace, the King, has bestowed upon you has evidently caused you to forget poor me.

He turned to her with a heavy sigh, but forcing a laugh, exclaimed—

"Ah, lady sweet, I am indeed bereft of senses. Your own beauty and the King's favour have dazed my brain, and for the moment I am confused and blinded, like one who has had the daring to gaze into the burning sun. But by and by I shall perhaps be well again."

"In the meantime, most noble knight," she answered, with her most fascinating pout, "I would crave the honour to tread a measure with you. That minuet the minstrels now tune likes me well; and see how gracefully the dancers move over the floor. My feet tingle to join them."

After this Robert had no alternative but to devote himself to his partner, and for the moment flinging his care on one side, he resolved to enjoy life for a brief space at any rate, so taking the dainty hand of Lady Beatrix he led her out, and they soon attracted unusual attention by their elegant and graceful dancing, an art in which they were both singularly proficient.

The excitement, the brilliant scene, the music, the mazy movements of the dancers, and the silvery voice of his companion soon distracted Robert's thoughts, and for the time being his trouble was thrust away.

The dance being ended the heralds sounded their silver trumpets, and announced that supper was served in the grand banqueting hall. Then a long procession was formed, headed by the King and his nobles, followed by the guests, amongst whom was Sir Hugh de Burgh; but his son, now Sir Robert, took his place amongst the knights, each knight leading a lady; and certainly amid the gallant and brilliant throng there was no more handsome or graceful couple than Sir Robert de Burgh and the Lady Beatrix Thirlstane.

"And do you give me the right to redeem my sex from your sweeping charge?" he whispered in her ear, and pressing the tiny white hand that lay so daintily upon his arm.

Turning her languishing eyes upon him, she answered dreamily—"an you so will it, and it is the King's pleasure."

The feast was a long and heavy affair, and many hours passed before the King gave the signal by rising, that the company could break up.

Flushed and heated with wine, Robert was perfectly

reckless now, and as he led the Lady Beatrix from the board, he begged her to give him a token before they parted for the night, or rather morning, for long as the winter nights were, the daylight was now creeping in; then, in obedience to his request, she took off one of her breast knots and presented it to him. *

Robert took the trifle, and touching it with his lips, requested her to pin it to his breast. This done, he kissed her, and pressing her hand they separated to endeavour to get a few hour's repose †

*The breast knots were made of ribbon, and kept together with costly jewels, by those who could afford them. A lady never gave a ribbon to a gentleman, unless she was desirous of receiving his addresses. Such a gift was consequently highly prized, but very frequently the possession of this love token compelled its owner to do battle against some jealous rival.

† It was not considered proper etiquette for a lady and gentleman in a high station of life to kiss each other, until they were affianced. Consequently, Robert's act was tantamount to his acknowledging himself her future husband.

CHAPTER V

THE APPARITION IN THE CHAPEL OF ST. MICHAEL

THE night's festivities at Linlithgow, were followed by a morning of penance and prayer, and at the hour of eleven the King and his Court repaired to the old Chapel of St. Michael to assist in a solemn religious service.

Robert de Burgh had been astir some time before this; for in spite of the heavy call that had been made on his physical and mental energies, he found that he could not sleep, except in fitful dozes; this restlessness, no doubt, being due to the excited condition of his nerves. Sir Hugh had early sought his son, to congratulate him on his good fortune in having secured the favourable mark of the royal favour. Sir Hugh was delighted in the highest degree, but the son felt cast down, as he remembered the difficult and dangerous position in which he had placed himself. He bitterly regretted that he had not immediately told his father of his unfortunate adventure at the hostel of the Lion. Now it seemed to him too late; or rather, he could not muster up the courage to make the confession. If it had been a question merely of which of the two women he would have preferred, Lady Beatrix Thirlstane or Alie Duncan, the choice would soon have been determined, and would most assuredly have fallen on Alie. Lady Beatrix was exquisite, but it was the exquisiteness of the exotic with all the exotic's insipidness. She had been brought up in the atmosphere of the Court, and

though she had the Court polish, she also suffered from its cramping and stunting effects. But like many women of her time, she had a capacity for great things, as she was destined subsequently to prove.

Alie Duncan, on the other hand, was rugged and rude, when compared with this Court flower. In form and face she was as near perfection as a woman might hope to be ; but she had an ambition quite out of place in one so humbly born, and the history of human nature has proved that ambition of this kind is almost invariably allied with cruelty, and cruelty in a woman is enough to make an angel weep. Robert de Burgh did not read so deeply as this, he only saw the faultlessness of form and face, together with a certain winsomeness and fascination that few men would have been altogether proof against.

It seemed to him as he thought the matter over, that had it not been for that incident at the Lion, his life's sun might have risen to a most perfect brightness, and all that man could desire might have been his.

A little later, he found himself once more in the company of Lady Beatrix on his way with the rest of the Court, to the Chapel of St. Michael. She looked jaded and worn after the excitement and labour of the previous night, but was superbly attired, and her beautiful hair was dressed with bands of the most costly pearls. She greeted Robert with a certain stately grace that was full of patrician dignity, but her manner by no means lacked warmth, and, so far as one in her position could do, she showed him by the little arts and wiles peculiar to a woman, that she was glad indeed to see him.

"Dare I hope that I have once been in your thought since we parted some hours ago?" he asked, as they rode side by side.

She flashed a look at him, and then, dropping her eyes, made answer in a musical whisper—

"Indeed have you, fair sir."

He kissed the ribbon she had given him, and which, in accordance with the fashion, he wore pinned to his doublet.

"Fortunate am I in very truth in being so richly favoured. An I but possessed your heart I vow that the world would contain nothing more that I would desire."

This was an open confession of his wish to win her, love, and it made her heart flutter and her cheeks burn. With a winning smile she replied—

"Men make vows only to break them, and we poor women are ever the sport of their passing fancies."

"I protest you are too severe on my unfortunate sex," he said.

"Protest not, sir," she answered gaily. "The vows and oaths and protestations of men are even as those that the dicers make. Therefore, sir knight, protest not, neither swear nor vow, an you would have me believe you true."

"By thine eyes only will I swear," he exclaimed, touching her whip hand as it rested on her knee.

"You make me happy," she murmured in reply as, dismounting, they entered the church, which for the nonce was a scene of brilliant splendour, made up as it was of gorgeous dresses, nodding plumes, flashing jewels, glinting weapons, and many coloured banners, and over all was the solemnity of the religious ceremony, which the priests and bishops had taken pains to make as impressive as it was possible to make it.

The King, with bare head, knelt on a stool by himself near the altar, and with bowed face and humble deportment seemed the most absorbed and most devout of all the great assembly. On one side of him, also kneeling, but some little distance removed, was the Lion Herald, Sir David Lindsay, and on the other side the Marshal, John Inglis. These two gentlemen were specially attached to the King as his confidential servants, and they were always close to him wherever he went.

The religious service had been specially commanded by James, in order that prayers might be offered for the success of the Scottish arms over England, in the attack which the King contemplated making. With great devoutness therefore he bent his knee, and humbly joined in the supplications of the clergy. The service had reached a very solemn and impressive stage, and the only sounds that broke the death-like stillness of the sacred fane, were the monotonous chanting of the priests, and the low and murmured responses of the assembled multitude. Suddenly a strange figure was observed to approach the kneeling monarch. The figure was that of a tall, stern, and even weird-looking man, of about fifty-two years of age. He had long straggling hair hanging about his shoulders, and his face was white, almost to ghastliness, and filled with an expression half sorrow, half anger. He was clad in a gown made of some blue kind of stuff cloth, while round his waist was a roll of spotless white linen. In his hand he carried a long pikestaff, which he seemed to grasp with a nervous, desperate clutch.

His appearance was sudden as unexpected, and it had a startling effect on the assembly, as he seemed to glide rather than walk along, and in a hollow, sounding voice cried—

“What ho! The King! His Majesty the King—the King! What ho, there!”

His movements were so sudden that before anyone could make offer to stop him, he had come to where His Majesty, with white and alarmed face, was kneeling. Then without any reverence, obeisance, or salutation, he bent down so that his lips came close to the monarch’s ear, and he said—

“Sir King, my mother has sent me to you, desiring you not to pass at this time where thou art proposed, for if you do you will not fare well in your journey, nor none that pass with you. Further, she bade me tell you to mell with no woman, nor use her counsel, nor

let her touch your body, nor you touch hers, for if you do, you will certainly be confounded and brought to shame."

The King's cheeks blanched, and then suddenly flushed with passionate anger at the idea of anyone having the presumption to intrude upon him at such an hour. Grasping the jewelled dagger that hung from his baldric he started to his feet. At the same instant Sir David Lindsay and John Inglis rushed forward to seize the intruder, thinking him some madman who intended to harm the King. But the moment they attempted to grasp him he suddenly vanished away, more suddenly even than he had appeared. Then consternation fell upon the assembly at this startling and supernatural incident. The King went on to his knees again and prayed fervently, and in a few moments the choir broke out into a pathetically solemn and beautiful hymn that had the effect of still further deepening the impression made by the appearance of the apparition.

CHAPTER VI

A CREEPING SHADOW OF EVIL PORTENT

THE extraordinary apparition in the Chapel of St. Michael set everyone pondering and talking, and many of those assembled were affected in a very marked degree, and looked upon it as a sure and certain augur of evil. The King, perhaps, was less impressed than anyone else, or at anyrate he endeavoured with good effect to conceal his real feelings on the matter, and during the next few days did all he could, by his example, to keep up the festive character of the meeting, and in spite of his naturally superstitious disposition he affected to sneer, and said the apparition was the result of some stupid delusion, or worse still, a vulgar trick that had been practised upon him. The Queen herself looked upon the singular affair in a very serious light, and regarded it as a heaven-sent warning against what she had always considered a head-strong and foolhardy enterprise. She reminded her husband that as yet he had but one child, an heir it was true, but a delicate lad, and that if he and his father should both be taken from her it would be a sore day for Scotland, and she prayed him, therefore, not to risk his life and the happiness of his country in any struggle with England.

These entreaties and prayers were alike thrown away, for they fell upon barren soil and brought forth no fruit. In fact, the King became very angry with his consort, and accused her of having no love for the country of

which she was Queen, but because she was the sister of Henry VIII. she was secretly desirous of seeing Scotland crushed and brought under the subjection of England; that, in fact, she herself was in league with her brother to gradually undersap the Scottish power.

This charge Her Majesty indignantly denied, but her husband grew furious, and gave orders that the Court should return on the morrow to Edinburgh.

By this time Robert de Burgh and Lady Beatrix stood to each other in the light of affianced husband and wife. Dazzled and blinded by the position such a union would give him, he had become callous and indifferent to everything else. And though he had halted and hesitated at first, he had at last put aside all conscientious scruples, and resolved to secure her at every risk, believing and hoping that Alie Duncan would not take the promise he had made to her in a very serious manner, but even if she did, that he would be able to satisfy her by the payment of a sum of money. At all events, he abandoned himself to the pleasures and seductiveness of the hour as though he thought no end would come to them.

To Lady Beatrix Thirlstane these days were filled with a happiness beyond which, it seemed to her, a human being could not go. Brought up in the conventional rigidity of Court life she had often sighed for the freedoms which a less high position would have given her. And besides, this very position was a source of incessant grief to her, for there was not a single individual amongst the brilliant throngs that surrounded her with whom she could claim kindredship. She was an alien, owing everything to the generosity of the King; and so strong was the feeling of clannishness, pride and caste in those days that she would not have been tolerated for a single hour, even by those who professed the strongest friendship, had it not been for the King's patronage.

The poor girl being of a quick and sensitive nature

had felt her position very much, and she had sighed for the day when as the wife of some honest man, she might attain to that independence which nothing else could give her. Her beauty drew upon her the passionate glances of the courtiers, and had she been so inclined, she might have become the mistress of—next to the King—the highest man in the land. She was endowed, however, with a high sense of honour and virtue, which even the licentious spirit of the time could not warp. It had always been the King's desire that Lady Beatrix should wed with some one far removed from Court influences, and when that some one was found, the King was prepared to make him a special mark for royal favour. He believed that in Robert de Burgh he had found the very individual he had long sought. He was the youngest son of a border chief, therefore had no immediate prospects of attaining to any high position, and so His Majesty had given evidence of his earnestness and favour, by bestowing upon him the dignity of knighthood. Consequently Robert's future—a future of brilliancy and prosperity—seemed all carved out; and at this time he might have known what unalloyed happiness was, had it not been for that one bitter drop which poisoned the whole. The days drifted away, however, and nothing came to give effect to his fears. No word apparently had reached the town of the tragedy at the Lion. Or at anyrate it had not reached the Palace, as it would have been almost certain he would have had some intimation of it. The consequence was, he began to feel more easy, and congratulated himself that nothing would occur to interrupt the course of his wooing with Lady Beatrix. For her, poor thing, it was a time of sweet joy. Her love—true as ever woman gave—she gave to Robert.

Of course, this lovemaking on the part of his son was not likely to long escape the keen observation of Sir Hugh. Foresight was a characteristic with him, and seeing clearly enough the advantage that would acquire

to Robert from a union with Lady Beatrix, he did everything he could to encourage it, taking especial care to let it be known throughout the Court that he countenanced the wooing.

At length the time came when private matters of his own warned Sir Hugh that he must take his departure for his home. But Robert showed no desire to depart. The brilliancy and gaiety of the Court were far more suited to his taste than the dull monotony of his father's grim old border castle. Moreover, he affected to find it too hard to tear himself away from his lady-love, therefore it was arranged that he should remain at the Palace, and that at an early date his marriage with Lady Beatrix should be solemnised.

As Sir Hugh and his followers prepared to start upon their journey, Robert sought the opportunity to whisper to the Raven, with whom he was an especial favourite—

“Lead my father back by a route that shall avoid the hostel of the Lion.”

David the Raven was quick to gather the significance of this wish, and with a knowing wink he nodded assent.

Robert often wondered how it was that he had heard nothing more about the affair at the Lion, but now that upwards of six weeks had elapsed he no longer had any fear about the consequences of his quarrel with Malcolm Laing, and Laing's death.

“No doubt Alie has taken some means to hush the matter up,” he thought to himself, “believing, as she does, that I am her affianced husband. Poor girl! sooner or later she will have to be undeceived, but in order to avoid any risk of an exposure I must pay her a secret visit, and so keep her quiet.”

Lulling himself thus into a false security, and living in a fool's paradise, he drifted into a Sybaritic indolence, and thoroughly gave himself up to all the license and the folly of the Court and the time.

It chanced one day that he was invited by some of

the Court gallants to a feast at the dwelling of a nobleman who lived in a house overlooking the North Loch. As was not infrequently the case, this feast proved the excuse for a debauch, and in imitation of his elders, Robert allowed his indulgences to run to such excess that for the space of nearly two days he was in a state of semi-insensibility. It was not until the morning of the fourth day that he had so far recovered as to be in a fit condition to meet his betrothed. He came into her presence with downcast eyes, and feeling very much ashamed of himself. Not suspecting the cause that had kept him away, she advanced eagerly and throwing her white jewelled arms round his neck, she exclaimed, in the pretty whimpering manner that she knew so well how to employ.

"Ah, my sweet knight, and wherefore have you been from me so long?"

Confused and abashed, and scarcely knowing what he said, he answered—

"A duty of grave importance called me."

"And why did you not see me before you went and have uttered one little farewell?"

"Because, my sweet one, the message that summoned me came so suddenly and left me no time."

"Cruel and exacting indeed must have been the duty that could take you from her whose life and light you are, and without a little word of good-bye."

"Make not a trouble of it, my love," he said, feeling very guilty and very uncomfortable.

"Ah, my dear lord, how can I otherwise," she sobbed, as she laid her head against his breast. "For three whole days have I not seen you. Three whole days! Think of it, my heart! Neither the sun nor the stars have shone for me during those weary days and nights. And those things and people that use to charm me charmed me no longer."

"And is it so, my own true love," he exclaimed. "Forgive me, sweetheart, and I will sin no more."

She seemed disposed to continue the subject, but he exclaimed—

“I have promised you to sin no more. An you love me, let the subject drop.”

“An I love you!” she said half reproachfully. “Do I not love you? You are my world, my hope.”

“You do me honour, and make me proud,” he replied not feeling altogether comfortable. Then quite suddenly she asked, as she looked full into his eyes—

“Is *your* love for me so very strong.”

“Aye is it, lady.”

“Aye is it, lady,” she repeated, drawing a little back in surprise at the apparent coldness of his tone. “Why sir, you speak with such little warmth that your words seem words only.”

“Upon my honour you do me wrong, sweet one,” he exclaimed. “Wherefore should you doubt me?”

“I doubt you not, Sir Robert,” she answered in saddened tones. “Heaven knows my faith in you is great, and should that faith be destroyed then shall I pray to pass to my eternal rest.”

“Your faith shall not be destroyed,” he cried passionately, as seizing a diamond cross that hung round her neck he kissed it with great fervour and said—“I swear by our Lady that I love you above all others, and the world can offer me nothing more precious than you.”

“Ah, now indeed am I perfectly happy,” she murmured with a grateful sigh, as she once more threw her arms about his neck.

“And now tell me dear life, how found you amusement during my absence?” he asked, as he led her to a seat.

“Amusement had I none, Robert my heart. On the second day there came a palmer to the Palace, and asked permission to recite to the ladies an account of his holy wanderings. I was dolorous and therefore glad that this holy man had come. Presently he

sought speech with me alone, for he said I looked so unhappy."

"And what said he?" Robert asked eagerly and with some misgivings, though why he knew not.

"He asked me many questions anent myself—if I were wedded or single, the name of him to whom I had given my heart, and many such-like questions."

"And you answered him?"

"Ay, in faith I did; and wherefore not?"

"You did not wisely, good lady," said Robert, irritably. "These palmers are often prying rogues, who, under the garb of sanctity, seek to gratify their idle curiosity."

"Nay, you do these holy men a grievous wrong," she answered tenderly.*

"It may be so," he said, with some warmth, "but I freely confess I like them not."

"He told me that he wished speech with you, for he could tell you something that would interest you."

Robert started, and a strange fear crept over him. Probably if his conscience had been clear such fear would not have possessed him, but as it was, it struck him that there was matter for suspicion in the palmer wishing to see him.

"His wishes will not be gratified then," said Robert, showing his ill temper.

"And wherefore not?" asked Lady Beatrix tenderly. "He is lodged in the under-grooms chambers, and he prayed me that when you returned I would make his presence known to you, and beseech you to give him audience."

* A palmer, unlike a pilgrim, made the profession of religion the sole business of his existence, and spent his life in wandering from shrine to shrine. The palmers subsisted solely on charity, and as they were freely admitted into places where other strangers would not have dreamt of going, it will readily be understood that their calling gave them great opportunities of learning secrets; while the garb of a palmer, which was almost universally respected, was not unfrequently adopted by those who had more sinister designs.

She pleaded so tenderly, she looked so imploringly, she touched him so bewitchingly, that, catching her in his arms, and carried away by his feelings, he exclaimed, "Ay, for your sake that will I, an he were the devil himself."

"You speak roughly, my lord," she said, starting away and looking reproachfully at him, for like all ladies of her position at that time, she had a deeply religious feeling, and unswerving faith in all those who assumed the garb of holiness, therefore she did not like to hear her lover speak with such levity.

"Pardon me, my dear one," he cried quickly, seeing that he had offended her. "If it is your wish I will see this holy man to-night."

CHAPTER VII

THE PALMER

ALTHOUGH Robert de Burgh had promised Lady Beatrix that he would see the palmer in compliance with her pressing request, he was by no means easy in his mind. For, think as he would, he could not dismiss the idea that the palmer's visit boded him no good. Of course, he looked at the matter from his own suspicious point of view, and he argued that a man, whatever his garb might be, who insinuated himself into a Palace, and expressed a desire to see some particular person, must have a reason out of the common for such a course. What was the reason in the present instance? Even a person who had no cause for fear such as Robert had, could hardly have helped coming to the conclusion that there was something strange in the proceeding. However, the promise had been made, and so Robert resolved to redeem his promise at all hazards, but he purposely delayed until the darkness of the night had fallen; then he sent his own private servant with instructions to conduct the stranger to him. He waited some time in his chamber before the servant returned in company with the palmer. The latter was dressed in a long robe of dark brown woollen cloth, that fell in heavy folds to his sandalled feet. A cowl came up over the head, and fitting closely to the forehead and the cheeks, effectually screened the face. A massive coil of

rope was twisted round his body, and pendant from the coil was a knotted scourge. As he entered he crossed his hands upon his breast, and bowing low muttered a short orison. Robert tried to scrutinise the features, but there was so little of them exposed that he could not learn much; but there was one thing that struck him, and he could not help noticing it, that was a certain fierce look in the eyes that seemed, as he imagined, to glare at him, and which was not at all in keeping with the character of a man who was supposed to be a representative of meekness, mercy, and charity.

This circumstance in itself, however, would not perhaps have alarmed Robert; but it happened that owing to the position in which the holy mendicant stood, the cross light from two torches fixed in sockets on different sides of the room fell full upon him, and as he straightened himself up after his bow, his robe in front divided sufficiently to reveal the gleam, or what seemed like the gleam, of a dagger. De Burgh's quick eyes saw this, and instantly all his suspicions were confirmed. Nevertheless he did not lose his presence of mind, nor give the slightest indication that he had observed anything to cause alarm. He moved leisurely to where his servant stood at the remote end of the long room, and whispered—

“Wait without, but be ready instantly to obey my call. Request also that some of the palace guard be within hail.”

The servant bowed and withdrew; then Robert placed a stool in the very centre of the room, and bade the palmer be seated; that done, he seated himself on an ottoman so situated that he could command every movement on the part of his visitor.

“I am curious to know the purpose of your visit, most holy man,” he began.

“Youth is ever curious,” was the strange answer, as the palmer again folded his arms across his breast, but the fingers of his right hand, this time were inserted

inside of his robe, and noticing that, Robert grasped the hilt of his own dagger.

"You answer somewhat saucily, Master Palmer," he said quickly.

"Think you so, fair sir?"

"Ay, by my faith, I do."

"Thou hast faith then?"

"An you have come here to question me on my *faith*, the door shall speedily open for your exit," Robert exclaimed angrily, as his brow darkened.

"Lose not thy temper, fair sir," the palmer answered. "My calling and my dress give me a privilege denied to others."

"What would you with me, then?"

"I would say some things that it may be to thy interest to listen to."

"Think you so?"

"Ay, by the mass!"

"Speak on then, and quickly, for I like you not."

"And wherefore not, Sir Knight? Is it because I am a holy man and poor withal that you despise me?"

"My thoughts are my own, and I keep them."

"Ay, marry are they; and maybe it is good for thee, sweet youth, that thou dost keep them."

Robert half rose, and his face reddened with anger-blood as he grasped his dagger; but he resumed his seat again as he observed that the palmer was telling his beads; though he cried impatiently.

"If you have come here only to bandy words, I bid you gone."

"Nay, sir, I have other matters; an you but have patience, I will convince you that it is wiser you give me hearing."

"To what end?"

"That shall you learn?"

Robert no longer had the slightest doubt that this man's visit had some connection with the incident of the affair at the Lion; but, if a doubt had lingered, it would

have been dispelled by the palmer's answer to the remark—

"You seem to have knowledge of me."

"I have *some* knowledge."

"Good," exclaimed Robert boldly, "let's to business then an you will."

"You wear a ribbon on your breast," the palmer pursued. "It is a love-token."

"And what of that?" asked Robert with fieriness.

"The lady who gave you that token hopes to become your wife," said the stranger, showing no concern at the other's anger.

"She does, and can you show cause why she should not?" Robert shouted, quite beside himself.

"Ay, by the rood, can I."

"Impostor and liar!" exclaimed Robert, as he started forward to seize the palmer, who rose, and standing erect like a statue he held his cross at arm's length, pointing at Robert, and with a deep scowl on his face, he answered sternly—

"Beware! Respect this symbol and the garb I wear."

There was something so commanding, so stern, so resolute in the man's manner, that the young fellow felt abashed in spite of himself; and giving utterance to a growl he resumed his seat as the palmer did his.

"I am neither impostor nor liar," the man continued, "maybe if I applied the words to you they might be more appropriate. Nay, scowl not, sir, and threaten not with your dagger. The cloak I wear is a sufficient shield. An you strike at that you strike your Church, and even you might hesitate to incur the Church's anger."

"Preach not," cried Robert, stamping his foot with rage, "for I will not listen."

"I will resume where you interrupted me," the man replied coolly. "You asked if I could show cause why the lady whose love token you wear should not become your wife! The *cause* is that your knightly promise has been given to another."

"Ah," cried Robert, with a start, "how know you that?"

"I have learnt it in my wanderings, and having a sacred regard for honour pledged, I took upon myself to remind you that even youth is no excuse for broken pledges."

De Burgh bit his lip. He felt somehow as if he were in a trap, and he saw now how thoroughly false was the security into which he had lulled himself. Still, head-strong as he was, he was not inclined to fall without a struggle, and so with sarcasm he remarked—

"Supposing I denied this charge of yours, what then?"

"Then should I put you to the proof."

"You are saucy for one of such seeming humbleness."

"I am not saucy, fair sir, but I claim to be very honest."

"And now tell me, most holy of palmers, where learnt you so much of my affairs?"

"It does not please me now to tell you where I learnt it."

"By'r Lady, but your tongue is uncommon rude."

"By'r Lady, Sir night, but your heart is uncommon false," the palmer retorted.

Robert's brow darkened again, and he bit his lip with anger; but he restrained his passion for he felt it would be decidedly to his disadvantage to openly quarrel with this man in the palace. So he contented himself with remarking—

"An that speech had been made elsewhere it might have cost you dear."

"I pray you threaten me not. An your heart were not false wherefore slew you the lover of Alie Duncan, and after pledging your honour to marry her, wherefore wear the love-token of another lady on your breast? Ah! your face turns white, and my words have pricked your conscience."

It was true. Robert had turned white indeed, and he felt the ruins of his castles in the air toppling about

his ears. Still he was not disposed to yield the prize that seemed so nearly his without a struggle. He rose and paced the room for a moment or two, in order to calm himself, but suddenly turning and facing the man he exclaimed fiercely—

“Who are you, that you dare to beard me thus?”

“A very holy palmer,” was the quiet answer, and the man folded his hands on his breast and bowed low, as he kissed his cross.

“Thou art a false knave and a lying dog,” Robert cried, as livid with passion he sprang forward, and tearing open the man’s robe, snatched from his belt the dagger he had already seen. With an equally sudden movement, the man seized Robert by the throat with a powerful grip, and as he shook him he hissed in his face—

“Beware! I came here to caution you not to be false to Alie Duncan. An you are, I swear by the Virgin Mary that the earth is not large enough to screen you from my vengeance.”

He threw him off, so that Robert reeled and nearly fell, but quickly recovering his equilibrium, he stammered breathlessly—

“Who are you? Your name, quick, or I will make you eat the dust,”

The man drew his cloak, which had become disarranged, about him again, and folding his arms in mock devotion and bowing his head, he answered meekly—

“A very humble palmer, an so it please you, Sir Knight of honour.”

Robert’s blood boiled. He felt half tempted to strike the man who thus bearded him and taunted him; but he saw that he could take a course that would more effectually crush his enemy, and that without compromising himself. So, stamping his foot, he cried in a loud voice—“What ho! without there!”

In an instant the door was flung open, and Peter, his

servant, appeared, while behind him were the captain of the guard and four armed men. The palmer took in the situation, and seemed a little disconcerted.

"Captain of the guard," said Robert, "make this man your close prisoner. In holy disguise he has managed to gain entrance to the Palace. That he is not what he seems, here is proof in his dagger which I succeeded in snatching from him; but notwithstanding this he tried to choke me."

At a sign from the captain, the four men approached and laid hands upon the stranger, who, with a scornful expression on his white face, and a look of fierce defiance in his eyes, asked—"And of yourself, Sir Knight. Have you naught to say?"

"I parley not with disguised impostors," said Robert loftily. "Remove him, captain, and I will bring the fellow's impudence under the notice of His Majesty the King."

"The time shall come, Robert de Burgh," the palmer answered firmly, retaining his presence of mind and self command. "The time *shall* come when you will crave to parley with me. *Mark those words.* Let them sink into your brain, for by this sacred cross they will come true."

Roughly, almost brutally, the soldiers dragged the man away, but he bore himself with pride and dignity, and flashed defiance to the last at his triumphant enemy.

Robert felt strangely uneasy. There was something in the man's words and manner, that startled him from his fancied security, and showed him that he had raised up a monster that might not be easily shaken off. And there was something else also that startled him still more, if that were possible—a something that made him reel and stagger, and turn pale. The soldiers in grasping the palmer, did it so unceremoniously, that his cloak and cowl were disarranged, and the latter falling down on to the shoulders, left the face fully

revealed, and it was *that* that startled Robert, so that he crossed himself and murmured—

“What does this mean? Have I dreamed, or is this reality?”

Then, perfectly overwhelmed, he sank down on to a stool, and burying his face in his hands, he mentally asked how he could extricate himself from the network of difficulties, which was gradually tightening around him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE EAGLE'S NEST

HE who travels up the Moffatdale; and comes to the thundering cataract of the "Grey Mare's Tail," whose white waters pour down for three hundred and fifty feet, and fill the rocky rift with floating mists, cannot but be impressed with the wildness of the scenery. But pushing his way further on until the thunder of the fall is subdued by distance, the impressiveness is deepened into a sense of almost awe, as the wanderer finds himself gazing upon the dark waters of romantic Loch Skene and the savage grandeur of its setting. Even to-day one may sit there, and so strongly will the sense of solitude lay hold upon him, that he will find it a difficult matter indeed, to realise that within a few hours reach of the spot are busy cities, teeming with eager multitudes; and roaring with the appliances of modern life.

Loch Skene in those days was indeed a wild, savage, and almost inaccessible retreat. Wild and savage it is now, but its inaccessibility has passed away with the old order of things and the coming in of the new. The traveller of to-day as he gazes up the loch will notice on the left and near its head a green plateau, elevated above the lake, and at the base of a rugged and rocky hill. On that plateau stood the feudal stronghold of Sir Hugh de Burgh.

This stronghold was known as the Eagle's Nest. It

stood solitary, dark, and grim on its lonely eminence, and commanded the country round about for miles.

It was a cramped and irregularly built pile, without a single element of picturesqueness. It accorded and toned well with the scenery that surrounded it, for it was grim, stern, and savage. Its grey walls seemed, to use a metaphor, to be contracted with a frown of anger, and its battlements appeared to grin defiance. The donjon keep was unusually high and narrow, and from its immense strength admirably served the purpose of a refuge and a look-out tower.

The castle was approached by a narrow pathway that wound up a steep slope. Entrance was then gained by a drawbridge spanning a deep moat. The portcullis was massive and heavy, and flanked by two octagonal towers, loop-holed from top to bottom, and armed with several pieces of cannon. On the other sides the castle was simply unapproachable, as the rock upon which it stood had been cut away perfectly smooth and perpendicular like a wall. And as this wall was over a hundred feet in height, scaling ladders were useless. The interior of the Eagle's Nest was scarcely less grim than the exterior; though as one passed under the portcullis and through the ponderous gateway, his eyes were gladdened by a small flower bed in the centre of the courtyard; and flowers in their season made a glory of colour here, and testified unmistakably to the taste and care of a woman, that woman being Isobel de Burgh, the beautiful and only daughter of the castle's owner.

In the appointments and furnishings of this stern dwelling there was an entire absence of anything like luxury. Nearly all the rooms were small. The floors were of dark, polished oak. The walls of the better apartments were hung with tapestry, where this was not the case they were quite bare.

Sir Hugh was not a wealthy man, for, although he had legal claim to a large estate, it was unproductive. In character he was rather inclined to moroseness, and

certainly he was as uncompromising and as stern as his own dwelling.

His daughter Isobel was noted for her wonderful beauty, but her father guarded her with a jealous care that was unusual, even for a parent. As a consequence, she had seen little of the world. She was under the care of her aunt, her father's sister, Lady Margery, who was as stern and ascetic as her brother, and endeavoured to mould her niece's life in accordance with her own cramped and narrow ideas.

At this time Isobel was nineteen years of age, and no man could look upon her without admiration.

It is now the end of February, and although the sun occasionally condescends to shed a few revivifying beams on the frozen earth, the hard hand of winter has in no wise relaxed. The snow lies deeply on all the hills, and is heaped up in enormous drifts in the gorges and ravines. Around the pinnacled crags the ghostly mists move in "silent white array," and the borders of the Loch Skene are fringed with jagged masses of ice. The grim old Eagle's Nest looks even more grim in its white surroundings, and the only splash of colour amidst all this monotony of dull tone is Sir Hugh de Burgh's scarlet and yellow pennon that floats out on the breeze from its staff on the summit of the donjon keep.

As we introduce the reader to the castle, it is the forenoon of a fairly fine day. Sir Hugh is at home, for he returned from Edinburgh some time ago. No news of his son had reached the castle since Sir Hugh's return, although Robert had promised to send a messenger with letters at least once a week. The Lady Margery and Isobel are in the courtyard, for Isobel has been superintending the removal of the snow from the garden bed, in the hope that some early spring flowers would soon push their way through the ground. Lady Margery is an elderly dame of severe aspect and soured visage. Her hair, which is grey, is gathered up in a huge and unsightly coil on the top of her head. She

wears a stiff stomacher laced, that extends far below the waist, while her blue quilted gown distended by enormous hoops, gives her the appearance of a squat Dutch doll.

A striking and wonderful contrast to this austere lady is Isobel de Burgh. Of medium height, with shapely head, and most perfectly proportioned figure, she might have posed for the model of a classical statue.

As she stood there, holding a small garden implement that she had been using, and with the gleams of sunlight playing about her, she looked a picture of light, grace, and loveliness. A picture in very truth! That is a picture such as a skilful and really clever artist might have designed and executed as a perfect work of art.

"Come, child," said Aunt Margery, as she motioned the page to place her stool, and she took an ugly poodle carried by the boy. "Come, child, methinks this raw air suits not my old bones, and I would prefer the warmth of the chimney corner. Let us go in."

Although Lady Margery was as severe with most people as she looked, she was very truly fond of her niece, and greatly proud of her beauty. In fact she believed and constantly expressed the belief that no prettier maiden could be found in all Scotland.

"An it pleases my dear good auntie I pray she will let me remain a little longer," Isobel answered in dulcet tones, as going near her aunt she patted the old lady's cheeks and kissed her wrinkled forehead.

"And wherefore, pretty jade?"

"Even because I am anxious about my poor flowers. I see two or three just beginning to show above the ground. The last snowfall was not kind, and wounded some of them beyond recovery, I fear me much."

"I' faith, child, thou art the bonniest flower in all the lot; and if these churlish winds and cutting airs that have no more respect for your tender cheeks than they have for my poor bones were to wound you, what then!"

"Nay, dear aunt, fear not for me. I am hardy and strong."

"Thou art a minx," said Lady Margery, tapping her niece's cheek playfully. "And ever when I say yea thou sayest nay. Methinks I ought to set thee a task of tenter stitch, or give thee two hours at thy virginal. Eh?"

"Good, my Lady Margery, that shall you do," answered Isobel, winding her arms round the old lady's neck; "but first let me finish my task here, and then, should you so will it, I will perform my penance very meekly; or, an you will prefer it, I will lull you into sweet sleep with my lute."

"Here, Nicol"—Nicol was the page—"take Launcelot"—Launcelot was the ugly poodle. The diminutive page did as he was commanded, and then Aunt Margery struggled to her feet with the aid of her ebony crutch staff and Isobel's arms, and kissing the girl said—"I will seek the comfort of the fire then, for my toes are frozen. In half-an-hour—remember no more—thou wilt join me."

"That will I, dear auntie," cried Isobel, as the old lady hobbled off, followed by Nicol, bearing the ugly poodle and the stool.

For some time Isobel busied herself about her plants, until her attention was arrested by what seemed like an altercation going on at the gateway, and she heard the gruff voice of David the Raven exclaim—

"Away varlet, I tell thee thou canst not see my young mistress."

"With your leave, gracious sir, I fain would crave her to purchase some choice pearls I have, for I am very poor and hungry, and have travelled far." This was the answer Isobel heard, and looking in the direction of the great gateway, she saw a peddler, whose further entrance was barred by two men-at-arms, who stood with crossed pikes, while David was parleying with him.

Her good heart was touched, as she heard the peddler

declare he was hungry and poor, and hurrying forward she said—

“Let the poor man come in, and I will examine his pearls.” At a sign from the Raven, the men-at-arms grounded their pikes, and allowed the peddler to pass.

“Thanks, my lady,” said the peddler, as he made a profound bow. “I have here some rare rings wrought by the cunningest Jew sellers of London; an you will permit me, I will shew them to you. He put his small box on the ground as he spoke, and made a motion as if he was going to unlock the iron band that bound it, but suddenly looking up he said, “Perhaps, lady, you would prefer to examine my trinkets elsewhere? the air is nipping and raw here.”

“Yes; follow me,” said Isobel.

“Shall I send a man-at-arms with you, Mistress Isobel? These peddlers are all knaves, and we cannot be too cautious,” the Raven remarked.

“No, David, I have no fear,” Isobel laughed. “In faith you are a very suspicious fellow methinks.”

“Ay, by the Rood, I am,” David answered. “We live in suspicious times, and the air is full of treachery.”

Isobel only laughed again and exclaimed—“I will give this honest peddler an order to bring thee a witch-lock, since there is so much danger abroad.”*

Then gathering up her skirts she tripped lightly off followed by the peddler. She led the way into the dairymaid's pantry, which was situated on the opposite side of the courtyard, and then seating herself on a stool she bade the man display his wares.

Looking round first to assure himself that no one else was within earshot, he lowered his voice and made answer—“I am not a peddler, lady, but bear an urgent message from thy brother.”

* A ‘witch-lock’ was a small lock of a drowned woman's hair, that was worn over the heart. When danger threatened the wearer the hair was supposed to curl up.”

Isobel found great difficulty in suppressing a scream at this announcement, for she at once thought that her brother must be in danger or trouble when he would take means of this kind to communicate with her."

"My brother," she gasped, "what of him. Is he well or——?"

"He is not dead," the peddler answered, quickly, interrupting her, "but he is in grievous trouble."

"In trouble," she cried; "what is his trouble?"

"He bade me not tell you, lady; but sent me very urgently to pray that you would come and see him."

"Alack, alack!" she cried in great distress, "how can I do that? I will away to my father and counsel with him."

"By all that's holy, and the love you bear your brother, do not that, dear lady," the man said, with a display of much anxiety, and actually holding her wrist as she was about to rise. In her troubled state she did not notice this, but asked—

"How am I to see him then without my father's permission?"

"It is an easy matter. He bade me say that he is lodged not three hours' ride from this?"

"Lodged not three hours' ride from this," Isobel exclaimed, in amazement.

"Ay, lady, and though I was not so ordered, I will tell you that he is sorely wounded, having been in a broil about a lady."

"Oh, Holy Mother, preserve him," Isobel cried devoutly.

"Where is my dear brother lying?"

"I was warned by him not to tell you that, but to conduct you there. I am the son of the person—a very honest gentleman—in whose house he is lodged, and you may trust me."

"And have you made provision for the journey?" she pursued.

"Yes, lady. Two swift horses are in readiness not an

hour from this. Give me but the order and I will bring them to any spot you like."

Isobel was still much agitated, and she covered her eyes with her hands for a few moments as she racked her brain for some plan. At length she asked—

"At what hour shall we ride?"

"At any hour you will."

"It must be at night; otherwise I could not leave without its being known."

"Good. At what hour shall it be?"

"The days are short, and the moon rises not to-night until nine of the clock," she said, "therefore we are favoured. At seven of the clock to-night I will leave the castle, and a faithful servitor whom I can safely trust shall row me o'er the loch, and on the opposite side you will be in waiting with the horses, and before the daylight dawns again I must be back."

The man seemed disconcerted, and displayed this in the anxious tone in which he remarked—

"Would it not be better to take no one into your confidence; not even a faithful servitor, lest even he might prove unfaithful."

"An my brother's state is so bad that I cannot even enlist the assistance of my tried attendants, he must indeed be in a perilous way," Isobel remarked, pointedly, and as though for the first time she began to doubt the man's honesty. His face reddened, and he seemed uneasy under her searching glance, but his apparent frankness and his answer quickly allayed her suspicions, if she had any.

"Nay, lady, be not angry with me. I am but a humble instrument, out of very love giving my services in his cause."

The man seemed so earnest in his speech that Isobel no longer doubted, and knowing how impracticable it would be for her to take an escort without letting her business be known, she determined to carry out the plan she first thought of, and that was to descend by a

secret and subterraneous passage to the lake, and then row to the other side of the loch, this plan being less likely to attract attention. She therefore told the pseudo-peddler to hold himself in readiness on the other side, and then giving him a fee, she dismissed him. Had she seen the look of malignant triumph, however, that came into his face as he turned away, she might have taken alarm, but unfortunately for herself she was too deeply absorbed to notice it.

CHAPTER IX

THE FURY OF WOUNDED PRIDE

IN order that no link may be missing, and that the incidents and events of this history may be more clearly understood, it is necessary that we go back a little in point of time, to that morning, that fatal second of January, when Robert de Burgh stabbed Malcolm Laing in the byre of the hostel of the Lion. Had it not been for that terrible snow storm which had driven the travellers to seek the shelter of the hostel on the previous night, this pitiable affair would never have happened; but having happened it was destined to affect more or less the lives of all those who figure in this chronicle. As already stated Malcolm Laing was of lowly birth, and the only son of a widowed mother, though not the only child, as there were four daughters.

This family were accounted, for people of their position, to be fairly well off, for the husband and father having rendered a small service to King James III., by saving from an infuriated wild boar a very favourite hound of the King's, received in return a grant of land.

Malcolm Laing, who at his father's death was little more than a child, was heir to the estate, which chance had given to his father, and it is more than probable that it was this knowledge that induced Alie Duncan to favour his suit when he came wooing her.

That she was horrified when she saw her lover weltering in his blood on the floor of the byre, was only

natural ; but this horror sprang rather from the dreadful circumstances that had brought about the tragedy, and the equally dreadful consequences that were likely to ensue, than for any real love she bore the unfortunate Malcolm.

Her first act was to shut herself up in her own little room from sheer fright, and though she certainly did weep, her tears were tears rather of mortification that Malcolm should have discovered her and Robert de Burgh together, for that discovery might prevent her gratifying her ambition.

It will not be imagined for a moment that at this time she was deeply in love with Robert de Burgh. Seeing that she had known him only for a few hours that could hardly be. But he had made a promise that she should be his wife, and so her love would come afterwards. At any rate, love or no love, he was too great a prize to be allowed to slip away ; and she made a very stern, mental resolve that she would hold him to his promise, and win him at every hazard ; and as she was a very determined and headstrong young woman, it was more than probable she would carry out her resolve.

While Alie was shut in her room bewailing the unlucky chance that led to the encounter between her two admirers, and with such disastrous results to one of them, her younger brother Ronald had occasion to go into the byre, and was shocked and horrified to discover the prostrate form of Malcolm Laing lying in what was literally a pool of blood. Recognising immediately in the blanched face who the fallen man was, he rushed into the house to call his father and other brothers, and in a few moments an eager, anxious, and alarmed crowd was filling the blood-stained byre. Geillie Duncan, like most of such men in those days, knew something of the art of stopping the flow of blood and of dressing wounds, and bending over the marble-like body on the ground, he applied his ear to the region of the heart, and, in a few moments, exclaimed—

"The poor lad lives. Quick, some of ye—water, lint, bandages."

These things were speedily forthcoming. Next some restoratives were administered to him, and in a little while he began to show signs of returning animation.

Of course there were many queries and much wonderment as to why the deed had been done, but it very soon became the unanimously expressed opinion of all present that Robert de Burgh was the guilty party, for they remembered the quarrel of the previous night between him and Laing. This opinion having become definite, there went up a deep and terrible exclamation of vengeance, and the feeling of hatred was intensified by the fact that De Burgh belonged to the nobles, and, as we have already said, there was a great deal of bad blood existing between the upper and lower classes.

No one suspected for a moment that Alie herself was the unwitting cause of this deed, and in deep sympathy and sorrow Geillie Duncan went in search of his daughter in order to gently break the news to her.

"Poor child," thought her father, "how little she suspects, and how shocked she will be." Then in pathetic tones he began—"My dear, I have some bad news for you, Malcolm Laing has met with an accident."

"An accident?" she echoed, imitating alarm and fright exceedingly well.

"Yes. Well—that is to say, we have reason to think he has been attacked by that dog De Burgh, who stayed under our roof last night."

"Attacked by De Burgh!" she repeated, still simulating surprise with perfect cunning.

"Yes, for we found poor Laing in the byre. He had been grievously stabbed——"

"And is dead?" she exclaimed, taken off her guard in her intense eagerness to know if the blow had really proved fatal.

"Well, no, not quite; and methinks he will recover."

"Recover," she echoed with a groan, and this time

with real alarm, for she was quick to see that her lover's recovery would compromise her very much, as well as complicate matters in an exceedingly unpleasant way.

"Yes, recover, and wherefore not?" asked her father in a changed voice, in which were some traces of anger, and at the same time he looked at her in a suspicious way.

"Nay, good father, I did not mean that I should be sorry if he did recover," she stammered.

"What then did you mean?" he asked warmly.

"I did—did—not mean anything," she returned, looking confused and reddening very much. "The fact is, you brought the news so suddenly that I scarcely knew what I was saying." Then she asked timidly, "Is—is poor Malcolm very sorely hurt?"

"Ay in truth is he. Hurt maybe to the death."

"That is terrible news indeed," she muttered with a sigh. "And has he told you how he met his hurt?"

"No. He has not showed signs of consciousness yet."

She drew easy breath again, and felt relieved. After all he might not recover. Her anxiety in this respect was due entirely to the fact that she feared she would incur his anger as well as her father's if he got better.

"Has a leech examined him?" she asked artfully.

"No; but one of the lads shall ride to Edinburgh, and bring back old Simon Spiers. He is a mighty clever leech, and I warrant me will save thy lover's life, an it is to be saved. But, come lass, descend with me, and comfort Malcolm."

"Not now, father. I have a faintness. The news you bring is so terrible, that it has made me sick. Therefore I crave you excuse me for the time."

As this seemed very natural to her father, he did not press her further, but took his departure, and Alie sat down to try and think of some plan that would enable her to escape the consequences of her folly, and she began to dream seriously of trying to communicate with Robert de Burgh, and asking him for advice.

A little later old Simon Spiers, the leech, arrived, and after making an examination of the wounded man, he pronounced that no vital part had been touched, but that the dagger had struck upon one of the ribs, and so been turned aside. It was a serious wound, however, and the unfortunate man had all but bled to death. But notwithstanding this, Malcolm so quickly recuperated, that in three days time he was able to converse freely, and he expressed an earnest request that he might be carried to his mother's house, but much to the surprise of his friends, he asked not a single question about Alie, who still kept in bed, and feigned illness.

James Duncan, the eldest brother, began to suspect from all the circumstances that there was something wrong, and he felt very angry against his sister, of whose conduct he had never approved. He even went so far as to suspect, owing to Laing's reticence, that her hand had struck the blow that had all but deprived her lover of his life. James was very much attached to Malcolm, and had always been most strongly in favour of Alie marrying him, as he believed he would make her an excellent husband. He therefore determined to get at the bottom of the mystery. So while his brothers were busy constructing a rough litter on which to convey Laing to his home, James went into the sick man and without any preliminary remarks said—

"Malcolm, lad, who gave you that wound. Was it my sister?"

Malcolm's white face flushed slightly at the abrupt question, but he answered—

"No. She has only wounded me here," and he laid his left hand over his heart.

"She has been fooling you then," exclaimed James, with an angry flash of his blue eyes.

"No, I do not say that; she has rather been fooling herself," Laing returned.

"Ah! what do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Nay, Malcolm lad, if you are a friend of mine do not try to deceive me. If my sister has been trifling with her own honour and that of her family, I command you in the name of our friendship to let me know."

"I have nothing further to tell you," Laing answered faintly, for he was still very weak.

James's blood fired up. He felt and saw that Malcolm was holding the truth back in order to screen Alie, and he cried—

"Why should you shield my sister if she has wronged you? My father is but a poor and humble man, and I his son inherit his poverty and humbleness; but by the blessed God who rules all, I swear that I will slay my sister rather than she shall sully our honour."

The wounded man was alarmed, and raising himself on his elbow, he stretched forth his other hand appealingly and said—

"Be not rash, James. Remember she is your sister."

"If I did *not* remember that I should be indifferent as to her doings," James answered wrathfully, and with significance. "If there is aught against her, why do you not tell me?"

"I have nothing to tell you," Laing moaned, as he fell back on his pallet, and felt appalled at the brother's anger.

Without another word James rushed from the room, and hurrying to his sister's chamber, he burst upon her without the slightest ceremony, and stamping his foot cried—

"Wherefore keep you from the presence of Malcolm Laing. Rise and come with me, for I have questions to ask you, that must be asked in his hearing."

White as a sheet, and trembling like an aspen, Alie shrank from her incensed brother, and stammered—

"Shame on you, James. Know you not that I am sick. Why come you then like a ruffian to bully me?"

"I know that you are a jade," her brother shouted.

"And you will not put me off with idle words. Rise, I say, and come with me."

"I will not rise," she answered, showing anger in turn.

Without another word, and in spite of her frantic struggles, James seized her in his powerful arms, and lifting her almost as if she had been a child, he carried her to the room where wounded Malcolm lay. Her lover looked at her with a pitying look, but she sank on to a stool, and covering her face with her hands wept.

"These tears are but the mask of hypocrisy," said her brother sternly. "Tell me," he cried, as he roughly seized her wrists and dragged her hands away, "who gave yon lad that wound?"

She did not speak, but turned her head on one side and looked terribly scared. "By heavens, now I am sure it was your own hand."

"You lie," she cried with sudden energy as she started to her feet, and with burning face, flashing eyes, and quivering nostrils stood straight up before him, looking a picture of rage and scorn.

"Ay, you are wrong," cried Laing, also gathering strength and energy from the excitement of the moment.

"Speak, then. Who struck the blow?" roared James passionately, glancing quickly from one to the other. "Was it Robert de Burgh's hand?"

"It was," groaned Laing, sinking back exhausted and making the confession in order, as he hoped, to screen his sweetheart.

"I thought as much," hissed James. Then seizing his sister's arm he dragged her towards the bed, and cried—"You have wronged Malcolm Laing. On your knees and crave his forgiveness. You are pledged to him, and you shall be his wife or no living man's. I will lay you dead at my feet before you shall barter away your virtue and honour in order to gratify your silly vanity."

Malcolm made an attempt to rise in order that he might interpose between the enraged brother and the trembling sister, but he was too weak, and groaned with the torturing pain that the effort produced.

Alie, however, had her fair share of the family fierceness and spirit, and wrenching herself free from her brother's grasp, she exclaimed, while her eyes glowed like living coals and her face was livid with passion—

"Though you be brother of mine I defy you and scorn you. And do not think I will calmly brook this outrage. I kneel to no man at your bidding, much less to Malcolm Laing. Because Robert de Burgh has sworn to make me his wife."

"Poor fool," said her brother with a contemptuous sneer. "Poor fool," he repeated, "that you could be so easily gulled by a smooth-faced knave. Dream you for a moment that this De Burgh will remember what he has sworn?"

"Ay, by my faith and soul do I," she exclaimed with great warmth.

"Go away, silly woman," sneered her brother, "lest in my just contempt and anger I may be tempted here on this spot to plunge my dagger into your bosom, and so save your father's honour from being sullied by an unworthy daughter."

Alie was so overcome by excitement and passion, that she was only too glad to hurry away and give vent to her feelings in convulsive weeping in the solitude of her own chamber.

For some minutes James paced up and down; then he went to the bedside, and, taking the hand of Malcolm, said tenderly—

"Poor lad. My sister has wronged you grievously. But you shall be revenged, or may God forget me."

CHAPTER X

THE COMPACT ON THE CROSS

MALCOLM LAING made no reply. He could not, for he was wounded and bruised in spirit. Rough he might be, humble he might be, uncultivated he might be, but he knew at least how to love even as a true man should love, and he felt in his own mind that he was deserving of a better fate. Still, he did not even *think*, much less utter reproaches against the woman to whom he had given his heart. All he hoped for at that moment was that he might die, and that she might not be wronged. He certainly wished her no harm, and would not have sanctioned the injuring a hair of her head.

James was very much cut up, for his pride was deeply wounded, even though he was nothing more than the son of a hostel keeper. But he had always been very jealous of his only sister's honour, and he had observed with pain and anxiety her flighty tendencies.

If she was resolved not to marry Laing, that resolve would have to be respected. But to James it seemed ridiculous to suppose that one occupying the high position of Robert de Burgh would stoop to marry a hostel keeper's daughter.

"He means to toy with her only," James thought; "to win her to his lustful purpose, and then, when he has tired of her, fling her aside like a rifted lute."

It was this belief that caused James such a fever of

anxiety and set him pondering how he could checkmate any such designs on De Burgh's part; and so far gain some power over him that he could force him to redeem any promise he had made to Alie.

It was a knotty problem to solve. James was too shrewd and clever not to see that. He knew that the De Burghs were a powerful family, and that Sir Hugh was a stern and uncompromising man with those who opposed him. It was notorious all the country through that this bold border chief had even set at defiance the King's power, and had only consented at last to swear allegiance because for reasons of his own he was desirous of having the King's favour.

Malcolm Laing having been comfortably bestowed upon the litter, the five brothers set off with their burden—James going, firstly, in order to relieve one of the others in turn, and secondly, because Jean Laing—Malcolm's second sister—was the betrothed of James.

The distance to be traversed was something like ten miles and the road was execrable, so that it was by no means an easy journey with such a burden as that of a seriously wounded man. Not one of the bearers, however, uttered a complaint, for Laing was much liked by the brothers, the two families having been acquainted many years.

James was sullen and thoughtful during the journey, for he was still racking his brains to invent some scheme whereby he might possess a foil against De Burgh. The painful truth was forced upon him in a manner that he could not be indifferent to, that if his sister chose to throw herself into the arms of her high-born lover, no persuasion that he as her brother might use would be of the slightest avail; while threats would rather tend to increase her obstinacy, and might even induce her to appeal to De Burgh for protection,

These were the thoughts and feelings that agitated the breast of James Duncan as he arrived at the home of the Laings, and greeted his affianced Jean. As the

eldest and most experienced brother, he was looked up to and acknowledged their chief with great heartiness, so that he knew he could command their services in any scheme he might plan.

The Laing household was greatly shocked and pained at the news and the sight of the wounded Malcolm, and the women of that household uttered execrations deep and long against the De Burghs. But execrations and hard words were but useless weapons, and particularly so, when used against a powerful family in favour at Court. What could humble folk do against such people, unless they brought treachery, stealth, and dark deeds to bear.

Jean Laing, who was nine-and-twenty years of age, three years younger than her lover, James Duncan, was conspicuous for her rather masculine character and her strong will. She stood about five feet nine inches in height, and her frame was large almost to massiveness. Her physical strength was nearly equal to a man's, and she had on many occasions proved herself capable of great endurance. She was nevertheless a most comely woman. It is true her features were rather coarse for a female, but they were regular and lighted up by an intelligent and pleasing expression. She had dark blue, deeply set eyes and an extraordinary mass of reddish hair that inclined almost to mahogany in colour.

James Duncan himself was a big man. He might, in fact, be described as massive and grim, so that physically he and Jean Laing were a well matched couple.

When Jean saw her brother, and heard how he had met his hurt she displayed strong anger, and spoke in terms of the utmost bitterness of the De Burgh family. And turning to her lover she exclaimed—

“James, my brother's blood so ruthlessly shed must be atoned for by blood. Are we to be crushed, trampled upon, and insulted because we are humble? I cry out against such a monstrous iniquity with all my woman's strength.”

This appeal to James moved him to action, though he was averse to doing anything rashly or precipitately. Yet he knew that his affianced wife would scorn him if he did not show some resolute spirit.

The hour was growing late. Without all was dark, and a dreary wind swept the wild moorland, and wailed through the snow-laden pine trees. The little group of five brothers and the stalwart Jean were gathered in the smoke-blackened and heavily-timbered kitchen of the house. A flaring pine torch, stuck into an iron sconce that was driven into the bare stone wall, threw a weird and fitful light over the little group. On the hearth flashed and flickered a half-burnt log, and its leaping flame called into being, strange and ghostly shadows that danced fantastically about the room, and chased each other amongst the great oak beams of the ceiling.

James did not answer Jean immediately. He seemed to be dwelling upon her words. Then when he spoke, he spoke gravely and deliberately, like a man who was delivering judgment in some terrible and weighty cause.

"I agree with you, Jean," he said, "that we must not submit tamely to be trampled upon like beasts by these nobles. If we are not as great as they, we are yet men and women with hearts and souls, and we can feel and love, ay, and hate too, as well as they can. But let us not despise our enemy's strength. To pit ourselves against the De Burgh's would be but a pigmy against a giant. I know not yet how we shall resent this wrong, we must wait. Our time will perhaps come."

"Our time is now," cried Jean, and the other brothers in chorus.

"Are we children that this wrong should be un-avenged?" asked Donald, the youngest, fiercely.

James, who had been sitting on a stool near the chimney corner, rose at this. His face was stern and angry-looking. He strode with great strides to the other end of the room, and snatching down a small iron cross that hung on the wall, for these people were of the

Catholic faith, he raised it above his head, at arm's length, and in a voice impressive and deep said—

"By this symbol of our faith I swear solemnly to be revenged for the wrong that has been done to us." He then advanced towards the group, and holding the cross straight out before him he said in commanding tones, "Jean and my brothers place your hands upon that cross and swear to do nothing without my guidance in this matter." They seemed to hesitate, and as his passion rose he stamped his foot and exclaimed—"Why do you hesitate? Have you no faith in me? Am I so weak of purpose, or am I a coward that you decline to make me your leader in an affair that needs so much caution, and we would not be utterly destroyed ourselves?"

There was something so awe-inspiring in his manner, so commanding in his tone, that Jean rose up and touched the cross saying as she did so—

"I have faith in you, James, and I swear by the cross to be guided entirely by you."

"And I," "and I," cried the brothers, as each one rose and solemnly touched the iron symbol of their religion.

Then at this moment the door opened and there entered the old grey-haired mother, and leaning heavily on her arm her son Malcolm, his ashen and bloodless face giving him almost the appearance of one risen from the grave.

"I tried to keep him in his bed," cried Mrs. Laing in great distress, "but he heard you from the next room, and he would come, he would come."

With the help of his mother he tottered to where the little group stood in amazement.

"Give me that cross," he cried, in a thin, feeble voice that painfully proclaimed how weak and ill he was. Snatching it from his friend's hand, he raised it to his lips and kissed it, while his sunken blood-shot eyes seemed to glow with metallic lustre. "*I swear*," he said, with awful solemnity, "*I swear that while my heart*

beats, Robert de Burgh shall not wrong Alie Duncan, or may God forget me in my hour of need."

There was something absolutely terrible in his appearance, a something that touched upon the weird, while his words seemed prophetic and mysterious, and his voice was most impressively solemn. But before his astonished listeners could make any response, the lustre in his eyes died out; his face, if it were possible, became whiter, and gasping out—

"Give me of water. I am choking," he sank to the ground in a swoon.

CHAPTER XI

THE RAVEN HAS AN OPINION

It will be remembered that Isobel de Burgh was visited by a pseudo-peddler, who, under the plea of wishing to sell her some pearls, had gained access to her presence, and had then informed her that her brother was in great trouble not far away, and wished her to go to him.

Had she been able to have seen the messenger, how, after he had got out of sight of the Castle, he was joined by four men, who had been lying concealed amongst the bracken and rocks; how each man was heavily armed, even the sham peddler, himself though he had taken special care to conceal his weapons when he was in the Castle; how the other four questioned him in one voice as to the success of his mission; how, when they learned it, they fairly laughed with joy; and then how they all mounted fleet horses that had been tethered behind some large boulders, and swept like a blast down the valley, she would certainly have been alarmed, and would not have trusted herself, save with an ample escort, outside the walls of the stronghold. But she did not see these things, and therefore was not alarmed, but busied her brain in wondering what had befallen her brother, and where he could possibly be lodged. Knowing, however, that he was somewhat of a gallant, she deemed it likely that he had fought a duel or had been in a brawl, and was afraid to return to his father until she had pleaded for him.

Thinking thus, whatever suspicions she might have had were now allayed, and her next difficulty was how to leave the Castle and get back before her absence was discovered. To solve this difficulty and devise some plan, took her a good long time, and as she had already been absent from her aunt too long, she started to go to her, but as she crossed the courtyard David the Raven put himself in her way, and making a profound obeisance said—

“Sweet mistress o’ mine, I liked not the look of yon peddler. Bought you the pearls he spoke of, my lady?”

“No, good David. He came not to sell me pearls, but to bring a message.”

She had no hesitation in speaking freely to the Raven, for she knew that aught she might say to him would be a locked secret in his breast, and moreover his presence instantly suggested to her that she should take him into her confidence. He had dangled her and her brother when they were babies; he had the courage of a lion, the strength of a giant, and would have faced a legion of soldiers to screen her from danger.

“May I never more quaff cappie ale if I didn’t think he was no peddler,” cried the Raven. “And what message did he bring you, Mistress Isobel, that rendered it necessary for him to garb himself like a dog of a Jew.”

“He brought me news of my brother.”

“Oh, your brother! which one?”

“Robert.”

“And what of him?” asked the Raven in alarm, as the affair at the hostel of the Lion flashed into his mind.

“Something has gone wrong. He lies hurt not far from this, and has sent urgently praying me to go to him.”

The Raven’s swarthy face grew dark with anger, and as he grasped the handle of his sword, and half drew the weapon from its leather scabbard, he exclaimed—

“By my mother’s soul I swear I believe it not. It is not like Master Robert that. Wherefore should he

come near his father's castle, and then send secret messages to his sister? Beshrew me but there is mischief about."

"Nay, good David, thou art ever suspicious," Isobel said, with a smile.

"Ay, mistress, we live in suspicious times, and there are devils abroad. But tell me, mistress, believe you this false peddler's story."

"In faith I do."

"And will you go as he requests?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And when set you forth?"

"At seven of the clock to-night."

"Then may the devil seize me if I go not with you," cried the Raven, as he brought his great clenched fist with a sledge-hammer bang down into the palm of his left hand, in order to emphasize his words.

Isobel could not help laughing at his earnestness, and she said playfully—

"Thou ought to have been called goose instead of raven, for thou art so quick to quack at a shadow."

"You shall, my good Mistress Isobel, write me an ass in big letters, an I am wrong in suspecting yon peddler to be a knave," said David with a grunt, "Let me crave you to go not forth to-night."

"An supposing it be true about my brother?" she asked.

"But supposing it be false?" growled David, and wishing to himself that he had laid hands on the peddler and trounced him well.

"But the messenger swore that it was true."

"A false swearing, mistress, or may I never more kiss pretty lips."

"Of a very truth, Master Raven, thou art hard to convince. I do believe that my brother sent for me. Leastways I am my father's daughter, and my father's son *may* be in danger, and on the strength of that *may* be I shall go."

"Bravely spoken," cried the Raven enthusiastically.

"So go I an thou goest, and may Satan fly away with me if harm comes to you while I can strike a blow. But tell me, mistress, how go you to-night?"

"I propose to leave by the secret passage and cross the loch with old Michael."

"Michael will keep your secret, but he is old," the Raven said, musingly.

"And faithful," added Isobel.

"Ay, faithful as a watch-hound; but he has no teeth wherewith to bite. So be it. The Raven will need the teeth the more. At seven o' the clock say you, Mistress Isobel?"

"Be at the postern gate at the chime without fail."

Isobel found her aunt in a very cross humour, and the Lady Margery rated her for having lingered so long in the garden.

"Methinks you are growing indifferent to me," cried the old lady tartly. "I have looked for you this hour and more, and yet you came not. By my cap strings, young miss, methinks you are not so obedient as I could wish you to be."

Isobel was so used to her aunt's whims and imaginary pains that she was not affected now, but she *was* greatly troubled in her mind lest she should not be able to get away from the Lady Margery in time to keep her appointment. At last however, she pleaded a racking headache and was allowed to go.

Making her way to her own boudoir, she summoned her maid, and sent her in search of Michael, who very soon came at his young mistress's bidding.

Michael was an old man turned seventy years of age. Being no longer fit for active duty, he had been specially appointed by Sir Hugh to keep the boats in order that were used on the lake.

When Isobel told him why she had sent for him, he seemed amazed, and in her interest expressed alarm, taking exactly the same view the Raven had done.

Isobel laughed loudly, and yet the old man's fears

caused her to have some misgivings for the first time. She had heard of such cases where the daughter of a house had been stolen away, either for revenge or for the purpose of extorting money. And yet, she argued with herself, who could possibly have any such wicked designs against herself.

"Thou hast grown nervous in thy old age, good Michael," she said. "But an this danger exists as thou fearest, I shall be well protected, for the Raven goes with me."

The old man's face brightened at this information, and he exclaimed.

"Ah, this is well. David is equal to six good men at least, and if he but thought that thou wert in danger, then by my faith methinks a thousand soldiers would not suffice to restrain him."

Isobel smiled at the old man's enthusiasm, not but what she shared some of it herself, for the prowess of the Raven had passed into a proverb, and she knew how strongly attached he was to her.

"I am glad thy fear has passed away, good Michael," she remarked; "and so at seven of the clock to-night thou wilt be waiting with thy boat at the entrance to the secret passage. But remember, no word of this journey must pass thy lips."

The short winter day was fast wearing to a close, and in a little while the great bell of the castle rang to announce the evening meal, which was always prepared for five o'clock. This supper was generally a long affair, for all the retainers, except the humblest servants, sat down with the family, and when the platters and dishes had been removed, music and jests were indulged in until about eight o'clock; an hour later the night watches had been set, and all those not on duty had retired to rest.*

* It was customary in these feudal castles for dependents and retainers to dine with the family. They were placed *below the salt*. The *saler*, or salt cellar, was in those days a massive silver dish, and was always set in the middle of the table. The inferiors of the household sat below this *saler*, while guests and friends were always placed above it.

It was customary for the ladies to rise from the table about half-past six, and Isobel had this in her mind when she arranged with the peddler to leave the Castle at seven. It seemed, however, on this particular evening as if she would not get the opportunity she sought, for when they rose Aunt Margery said—

“Come you to my chamber, child, for I am sending to Edinburgh for a new gown for you, and I would discuss with you the colour it should be.”

Isobel was alarmed for she knew from bitter experience that when her respected aunt got on the topic of dress, it was difficult to say when she would end, for it was a favourite theme with the dear old lady, and one on which she waxed eloquent.

“Oh, auntie, dear, I would crave to be excused to-night,” she cried, feeling quite desperate, “an you would permit me I would retire to my bed at once, for I still have a sore head.”

Isobel felt very guilty as she gave utterance to this fiction, but she really could not help it, for she was perfectly well aware that unless she made some such excuse her aunt would not let her away for hours.

“A sore head,” exclaimed her aunt. “In faith, I know whence got you that. It is the result of lingering so long this morning in the garden. Go you to your room at once and your serving-maid Jennette shall bring a hot possett.”

Isobel was only too glad to get free from her guardian, so, kissing the ancient lady’s withered forehead, she sped to her room, where, with palpitating heart and some misgivings, now that the moment of departure had come, she robed herself for her night journey.

CHAPTER XII

UNDER COVER OF THE NIGHT

LIKE most strongholds of its kind, the Eagle's Nest had a secret passage that could be used either for entrance or exit in time of need. The one in connection with the Eagle's Nest was situated far below the basement of the building. It was reached by a flight of stone steps, the bottom of which was closed by a massive iron door. The door gave access to a long vaulted tunnel that was so far below the surface of the ground that there was no light and very little air. The tunnel was tortuous and nearly two hundred yards in length. It had its exit beneath an over-hanging rock close to the water of the Loch Skene, this exit being also guarded by a massive gate that was entirely screened by overhanging creepers.

This secret passage was only known to a few of the most confidential retainers, amongst whom was the Raven. Even Isobel herself had never visited it, although she was aware that it existed; and she knew that on two or three occasions, when the castle had been surrounded with enemies, this secret way had been used to convey messages and bring in provisions.

At the appointed time the Raven appeared outside of her chamber door, and tapping twice as by preconcerted signal, waited until she appeared ready for the journey. She was clothed warmly in a large fur cloak, and her face was almost entirely concealed by an ample hood.

She followed David, feeling a little excited at the

idea of the adventure, which came as an agreeable change from the monotony of her every day life. She shuddered a little as she traversed the subterranean tunnel, for it was so damp, and dark, and dismal, and seemed so well suited to dark deeds, that to a stranger it was awe-inspiring. But when David flung open the last gate and pushed aside the heavy creepers in order that she might pass, she went out into the open air with a keen sense of enjoyment and liberty. It is true the night was dark and the wind moaned dismally as it swept over the deep waters of the loch; but to be free even for a brief space from the exacting guardianship of her aunt was such an unusual thing, that her sensations were akin to those of a liberated prisoner.

The Raven gave a low whistle as he emerged from the passage, and then Isobel heard the splash of oars in the water.

"Give me your hand, sweet mistress," he said "and I will guide you."

She did as she was desired, for although they were not more than a dozen yards from the water the darkness was so intense that unaccustomed eyes found a difficulty in discerning anything. Michael was ready with his boat, and David helped Isobel to get in, and when she was seated she could make out that there was another boat with men in it.

"What is that boat there, and who is in it?" she asked a little anxiously of the Raven, who was sitting next to her.

"Well, mistress o' mine," he said with a laugh, "I thought we might as well be prepared for anything that is likely to occur, and so I have four of my most trusted men in that boat. Methinks they will be able to give a good account of themselves."

"You are a suspicious goose," returned Isobel a little tartly, for she considered all these preparations very unnecessary. Then she added, "But you fighting men are always ready to seek broils."

"Nay, fair Mistress Isobel, you wrong us, we live in times when every man has to be on his guard against his fellows, and he who goes unprepared is a fool. A man must not be caught napping. For ourselves, however, it matters not, but I am not such an addle-pate as to allow you to run any risk without my being prepared to checkmate treachery if any is intended."

Michael was now rowing across the loch, and the other boat was following at a little distance.

Isobel was elated, for the position for her was at once novel and exciting.

"If dear old Aunt Margery only knew that I was here now, how angry she would be," thought Isobel, and she fairly laughed to herself as she remembered how she had deluded her watchful guardian.

Very soon the keel of the boat grounded on the opposite shore, close to the spot where the peddler had promised to be. Her mind now being full of thoughts of her brother, Isobel rose eagerly in her anxiety to spring out, but the soldierly caution of the Raven interposed, and restraining her gently, he whispered—

"Not so fast, young mistress. Let me reconnoitre first."

Isobel rather chafed at this restraint, for she was all impatience now to reach her brother.

The situation was an impressive one, and for the first time Isobel began to feel it so. "After all," she thought, "may not the Raven be right in his suspicions." And for some reason or other which it was impossible for her to define, it now seemed to her very likely that treachery was at work, and she was to be the victim?

Of course this change of feeling on her part was due entirely to the novel situation in which she found herself. The darkness was so impressive, and the struggling rays of the moon as they broke through the jagged rents in the banked-up clouds, only served to give weirdness to the scene. The black trees, but faintly perceptible, looked spectral, and the water in its smooth-

ness and stillness in the little bay where the boat lay, somehow seemed so suggestive of lurking danger. And then that indescribable sound which the night wind utters. A suspiration, so to speak, which rising and falling with painful monotony, seems so mysterious in a lonely place.

The suspense and inactivity of the moment very naturally begot a nervous feeling in Isobel, and she had to confess to herself that she really was frightened. The poor girl felt quite relieved when, after some minutes of painful suspense, she heard the familiar voice of the Raven.

"Methinks, mistress, we have come on a fool's errand," he said. "There is nobody but ourselves here."

"Perhaps we are before our time," Isobel suggested timidly.

"It is more likely, Mistress Isobel, that our party is too big for those who were anxious that you should come, and they have taken alarm," answered David significantly.

"But wherefore so?" asked Isobel, scarcely gathering his meaning.

"Nay, that I know not. But there are *some people* who prefer to meet a defenceless woman rather than armed men."

The Raven was evidently uneasy. He was disappointed too, for he had come away deeply impressed with the belief that he was going to have an exciting little adventure; and believing also that he and his men—he had even taken the precaution to fully arm old Michael the boatman—were equal to any emergency, he had not the slightest misgiving as to the result of an encounter unless the odds against them were overwhelming.

"Well, mistress, what say you? Shall we return?" he asked after he had made another reconnaissance without any result.

"I think perhaps we had better wait a few minutes

longer," Isobel answered nervously, and feeling very reluctant to go back, until even the remotest chance of proving whether it was true about her brother or not had passed away.

"As you will," said the Raven, shrugging his shoulders and walking away again until the darkness had swallowed him.

Isobel still sat in the boat, which old Michael kept within a yard of the shore. The other boat also was close to the strand, and the four occupants were on the *qui vive*, with their wheel locks primed and ready.

Presently the powerful voice of the Raven was heard to utter the challenge—

"Who goes there? Art thou friend or foe?"

Isobel shuddered again, for the suddenness of the challenge was startling, and the men in the boat rose to their feet ready to spring on shore. Then the burly form of David was distinguishable as he stood on his guard, grasping his long, bright knife.

"Who is it? What is it?" asked Isobel tremulously and nervously.

"I heard footsteps, mistress," answered the Raven curtly, still standing on his guard and straining his eyes as he tried to pierce the veil of darkness.

"Halt and declare yourself," he suddenly cried, at the same instant drawing a pistol from his belt and pointing it at an advancing figure. "Halt!" he bawled again in stentorian tones, "or by the mass and the mother o' God I'll let a draught of air through your body," and the lock of his weapon clicked ominously.*

Isobel was greatly excited, and the four men stood with their matchlocks to their shoulders, ready to fire at a signal from their leader, while Michael, as a precautionary measure in the interest of his precious charge, pulled his boat out a little further into the lake, so as to place a depth of water between him and the shore.

* The pistol was a new weapon. It was introduced during Henry VIII. reign from Pistoid in Tuscany.

In answer to the Raven's challenge came a voice out of the darkness.

"What loud-voiced, rough-tongued, blaspheming swashbuckler are you, that you are so bold in the presence of a woman?" the voice asked, and its tones unmistakably proclaimed its owner to be of the feminine sex. For if they were not dulcet and gentle, they were certainly lacking the fulness and power of a man's.

"A woman," echoed Isobel in surprise, and rising from her seat.

"So it would seem," growled the Raven, but in no way relaxing his vigilance. "A woman, however, in such a place and in such an hour, means danger," he added, rather to himself than to anyone else.

In a few moments the figure of a woman became visible as she approached.

"Put up your weapon, good sir," she said, contemptuously. *Men* fight not with women."

The Raven thrust his face close to her's, so as to scrutinise her features, and then, with a deep growl, as he restored his pistol to his belt, he said—

"There are female devils and she-tigers. Who are you and what do you want?"

Without deigning to notice his remark, she moved towards the water a few paces, and asked—

"Is there one Isobel de Burgh here?"

"Yes, I am she," Isobel answered, as she stood up, and told Michael to row the boat in. What do you want with me?"

"In my house your brother, Robert de Burgh, lies nigh unto death, and he has prayed me to conduct you to him."

With a little cry Isobel sprang out of the boat and on to the shore and in accents of wild alarm she exclaimed—

"Oh, my poor brother! where is he? Take me to him at once,"

"I have promised to do that; but tell me why come you here with armed men?" returned the woman, who had evidently detected the four men in the other boat.

"She came by my advice, prepared for any dangers," interposed the Raven hoarsely, and thrusting his knife back into its scabbard with a jerk.

"And pray, most noble fire-eater, what were the dangers you expected to encounter?" asked the woman with a sneer.

"Wild cats and other night vermin," answered the Raven. Then, quite suddenly, he turned on the woman and demanded with fierceness. "Who are you?"

"A woman," was the cool answer, which did not tend in any way to soothe the Raven's ruffled feelings.

"And who was the dog of a peddler, who came to the castle?" he demanded menacingly.

"The dog of a peddler was no dog of a peddler, but my brother," the woman replied scornfully.

"Well, I like you not," returned the invincible Raven. "You smell sulphury, and I swear I believe your feet are cloven."

"Nay, good David, do not be so severe," interposed Isobel tenderly, and all impatient to get away to her brother. "You must pardon him, my poor woman. He is as honest as steel and as true as gold, though he is rough in his speech."

"Ay, beshrew me, but you are right, lady. He *is* rough," answered the woman. "But come let us away."

"Come you with us, or stay you here?" asked Isobel turning to the Raven.

"I go with you, or may the devil burn me," he answered.

"You seem very determined, *Sir Soldier*," the strange woman remarked with a scornful sneer.*

* *Sir Soldier*, a term of contempt usually applied to a swaggering, boastful fellow.

"Yes, good lady, that am I, as you may yet find," he answered with equal scorn. "What, ho! Ronald and James," he cried to the men in the boat, and instantly two giants sprang on shore with alacrity, and looking very dangerous in their massiveness and strength, and fully armed as they were. "Come, you also," he added.

The moon had risen high now, and her light rendered everything perfectly distinct, the strange woman drew herself up in a scornful way, and asked in tones of anger—

"What think you I am? Do you take me for a cut-throat or a witch, that you deem it necessary to bring your fighting men with you?"

"You may be either one or the other for aught I care," the Raven snarled. "It concerns me not. What does concern me is my mistress's safety. And until I know more of you, I trust her not with you."

"Your talk is big like unto yourself, fair sir; but there is not much danger in either," was the sarcastic retort, "You must be taught, however, that it suits not the profession of arms, for a big and armed man to bully a weak and defenceless woman."

"Nay, I pray you both think not so ill of each other," Isobel pleaded. "In truth the Raven is very brave and very gentle."

"It may be so, mistress, but as yet I have seen neither quality displayed," was the answer. "I come here on a peaceful mission, though this very worthy gentleman treats me as if I were a raider from over the border. But a truce to this parleying. If your protector brings his men I go not, unless he thinks they be necessary to protect his own fair person."

"David, you must leave Ronald and James behind," said Isobel, with great decision. "I shall feel perfectly safe with you."

The Raven shrugged his shoulders and gave a deep grunt, as was his wont when annoyed and angry.

"So be it," he said. "Bide you here, my men. Ronald, that is a good wheel lock of yours."

"Ay is it, Raven."

"You have tested it often?"

"In faith I have."

"Give it to me." He took the gun, and examining the lock, and priming by the aid of the moonlight, he remarked to the woman, as he laid the gun on his arm, keeping his right hand on the lock—"Good, my lady, lead on. You may be honest, or may not. That is your affair. Mine is to protect my young mistress, and if I see the slightest sign of treachery on your part I will blow your brains out."

Isobel shuddered, and felt truly frightened; but the stranger only remarked, as she turned to Isobel—

"Poor little thing. How very much crushed you must feel under the protection of such a dreadful and dangerous man."

Isobel made no reply; she was rather disposed to cling to the woman out of a sympathetic feeling. But she did not do this. She merely pulled her cloak closely about her shoulders, and then followed the stranger, the Raven bringing up the rear at a respectable distance, but keeping his hand on the lock of his gun, and his eyes on the tall woman as she strode along with masculine steps.

At length when an hour had passed, the Raven asked the stranger gruffly—

"How much farther have we to go?"

"A good half-hour yet," she answered, equally gruff.

Nothing more was said then, and the journey was continued over a wide open space for a considerable distance, until a wood was again reached, when the woman suddenly halted near a great mass of rent rock that was piled up like a natural barrier, and turning to the Raven she said in a low voice—

"This is the end of your journey."

The words were evidently a signal, for instantly there

sprang up from under the very feet of the Raven, so it seemed, the figure of a man. A knife gleamed in the moonlight, and like a flash of lightning the man struck a fierce blow and buried the knife in David's body. The Raven reeled, but with instinctive quickness he pulled the lock of his gun and fired, the report reverberating like a clap of thunder, and startling the birds from their roosting places. The aim was harmless, however; the gun fell from his hands and he pitched forward on to his face.*

Isobel uttered a scream, but it was smothered by a heavy cloak that somebody threw over her head. Then she was caught up by a pair of powerful arms and hurried along for about a hundred yards, where men and horses were in waiting. The man who was carrying her lifted her in a fainting condition to the back of a horse, and sprang up behind her. The strange woman mounted behind another man; a third man, already mounted, came from the shadow of some trees. The woman and the men exchanged some words, then, waiting for a few moments to listen if they were pursued, they urged their horses into a gallop and were soon lost in the darkness of the woods, and the hush of the night was only broken by the sougning of the wind.

* The wheel-lock gun was an improvement on the match-lock which was a clumsy and cumbersome weapon. The wheel-lock, which was an Italian invention, was fired by means of a steel wheel set in motion by a trigger. The wheel produced fire by rubbing against a piece of sulphuret of iron. It was considered a powerful and terrible weapon at that time.

CHAPTER XIII

A WOMAN'S HATE

THE act of treachery which laid the Raven low had been so unexpected and so sudden in its execution that the unfortunate man, quick and savage as a wild tiger as he was when aroused, had no chance, and went down before the well-aimed blow without being able to cope for an instant with his unknown enemy. That firing of his gun, however, proved an important factor in the sum of his destiny, for before leaving the boat he had secretly told his men to follow silently and at a short distance in case of any emergency. This order had been faithfully obeyed, and the report of the gun was the signal to them that something was wrong.

Used as they were to make and receive night attack in their border raids their instincts were quickened and their faculties ever on the alert, so that the moment the report pealed as a reverberating clap of thunder amongst the surrounding hills, they sprang forward like wild animals startled by the hunter, and in a few minutes were standing over the body of their fallen leader.

Although grievously wounded the Raven was still conscious. He was breathing stertorously, and the blood was spurting from his wound; but with utter unselfishness and true regard for his young mistress, and like a brave man as he was, he exclaimed, as his followers bent low over him and gave expression to wailing lament—

"For the Holy Mother's sake never mind me, but forward and rescue your master's daughter or die in the attempt."

Three of them sprang to their feet, and drawing their weapons rushed away in the direction indicated by their fallen chief. The fourth man, however, made an effort to stop the flow of the outpouring blood from the Raven's body, knowing well enough that unless it were stopped David the Raven would soon be gathered to his fathers. The man had some rough skill in this way, which was backed up by considerable intelligence, and in spite of his leader's protestations and commands to him to follow his comrades, he persisted, and with such success that he stanchd the bleeding, and not a moment too soon, for the wounded man had grown so weak that he could no longer speak and seemed to be sinking into coma. His faithful attendant seeing this drew forth his collapsable leather cup, which every soldier in those days carried, and rushing to a stream that bubbled not far off, he returned with water which he dashed into his chief's face and poured down his throat.

The dawn of the winter morn struggled in, revealing the cold, cheerless land, bathed in damp, clinging fog, and the leafless trees shivering in the pitiless breeze. But no living thing save themselves could the men in chase discern, not a bird in the air, not a beast on the land. Those who had done the deed had got off, leaving no trace behind them.

The three men held counsel amongst themselves as to what was best to be done. It seemed to them folly to pursue further their fruitless quest. Better to return with all speed to the Eagle's Nest, for it was certain that as soon as the lord of the Castle learned the news, "boot and saddle" would sound, and a little army would pour forth to exact a terrible revenge for the audacious deed.

Having made up their minds, they retraced their



steps, and soon came up to where the wounded Raven was still lying, carefully tended by his faithful follower, who had long been straining his eager eyes in the hope of seeing his returning comrades, for he was anxious that his leader should be conveyed back with all expedition, so that he might have the advantage of the Castle leech. The man had collected a quantity of dead bracken and heather, and, making a bed under the shelter of the rock, he placed his chief upon it, covering him up with his plaid. As the others came back the Raven raised his head, and inquired what news they brought; and, when he heard that their pursuit had resulted in nothing, he sank back again with a groan, and begged of his comrades to kill him. So far from complying with his request, however, they hastily constructed a rude litter, on which they placed the wounded man, and then gently and tenderly carried him back to the boat, where old Michael, weary with long waiting and watching, had fallen asleep.

He was quickly aroused, and when he saw the Raven stretched, seemingly dead, upon the litter, he fell to weeping and wailing. The Raven was aroused by the noise he made, and raising himself to his elbow with difficulty, he said fiercely—

“Are you a wean or a woman that you load the air with this horrid din? There are matters more weighty to be considered than my hurt. What matters it for me when your lord’s daughter is stolen away? I curse the hand that failed to strike a fatal blow. I ought to be dead instead of lying here helpless like a broken reed. Cease your wailing and think no more of me, but speed ye on the wings of the wind to the Castle and tell your master that his bonnie flower has been stolen away. By the Virgin, but there will be some wild riding and hot work to-day, and I shall not be able to take part in it. Oh, a treble curse on such a fate. Kill, kill me if you love me, and I will plead for you in heaven.”

He fell back exhausted, and shudderingly covered his face with his hands.

He blamed himself mercilessly for it all. He had allowed his instincts to be wronged, his suspicions to be lulled, and he was paying the penalty, and yet when the hour of vengeance was sounded he would not be able to take part in smiting the enemy. It was this thought that made him writhe and groan with mental anguish.

Michael felt rebuked, and was silent, but none the less sorrowful, and with hasty strokes he rowed the wounded man across the lake.

It was still early when the little party reached the castle, and none save the servitors were astir. Soon there was commotion and excitement when it was known that David the Raven, "David the well-beloved," was wounded nigh unto death.

The castle leech was speedily summoned, and he examined the wound critically and carefully, and pronounced it serious, but not likely to prove fatal, if the injured man could only be induced to keep quiet. The doctor dressed the wound and bound it up, and that done, the Raven insisted on being borne by two of his men to the sleeping chamber of his master.

Sir Hugh had not yet risen, and when his faithful captain was brought into his presence, it was the first intimation he had that aught was wrong.

"What means this?" he cried, as he sprang from his bed. "There has been treachery at work."

"Ay, by the mass there has," the Raven groaned.

"Who has been guilty of it? By God, and the Lady but there shall be a short reckoning," cried Sir Hugh fiercely, as he struggled into his clothes.

"Ay, there shall," responded the Raven grimly shaking his fist menacingly and catching his master's fieriness. "The vengeance of the De Burgh shall indeed be awful and swift when it is known that the daughter of his house has been stolen away," he added solemnly.

Sir Hugh turned sharply and stood gazing upon the

Raven as if he had suddenly been struck dumb. But the expression of his face was awful, and his eyes seemed to gleam fire.

"Stolen away!" he echoed, as if he had doubted the evidence of his senses.

"Ay, my master, that is what I said."

Then David told the story of the night's adventure, and Sir Hugh listened impatiently until with a cry of terrible rage he exclaimed—

"Saints above! but there shall be hot work for this. The earth is not large enough to hide from my vengeance the fiend who has stolen my daughter. Away and give the alarm. In fifteen minutes if there is a man not ready to ride let him mutter an orison, for I'll cut out his heart."

The Raven needed no second bidding. In a few minutes the alarm bugle sounded throughout the castle, and then a scene of wild excitement ensued. There was a rushing to and fro; saddles and arms were hastily adjusted; there was the impatient neighing and stamp of horses, mingled with the oaths and vows of equally impatient men. There was the rattle of arms and clanking of armour and the swish of ponderous battle axes as stalwart warriors in their excitement slashed at imaginary heads.

For some minutes everything seemed in hopeless confusion, but every atom of that well-trained fighting band knew his work, and was used to these sudden calls, so that in five minutes less than the quarter of an hour allowed by the chief, two hundred stern and defiant men were seated in their saddles, and the restless steeds were pawing the ground in their eagerness for the wild ride which they knew well was in store. Then there entered the courtyard, looking grim and awful in his tremendous rage, Sir Hugh de Burgh. He wore a coat of chain mail, and carried a ponderous two-edged sword. His groom stood near, holding by the bridle a gigantic coal black horse with quivering nostrils and

brilliant eyes. Sir Hugh vaulted into the saddle, and put himself at the head of his little band. Then, at the blast of the bugle, the massive portcullis was raised, the drawbridge lowered; and, with a deafening clatter and a fierce cry of vengeance, the small army swept out into the open country, and tore down the hill like a tornado, and the unfortunate Raven, like a bound wild animal, chafed and stormed at his inability to take part in that exciting ride. In fact, he did make a desperate effort to mount a horse, but he soon found that he was only human, and that the wound he had received was far too serious to be trifled with. His effort only served to exhaust his little remaining strength, and he fell back motionless, as if all life had suddenly left him. Faithful hands bore him to his lodgings, and the leech was hastily summoned to suppress the bleeding which had broken out afresh.

In the meantime Sir Hugh and his little band of devoted followers scoured the country, trying to find some clue to the whereabouts of the stolen daughter. But the wild wilderness, solemn and white in its winter snow, gave no sign. The men split up into little parties, and appointing a common rendezvous, set off in different directions.

For long hours the search was continued, until night coming on, each party made its way to the rendezvous with a story of failure. No one had been found who could give the slightest information; no one upon whom suspicion could have rested for a single moment. Had such been the case it would have been woe betide the luckless individual. But the searchers had to confess themselves baffled and beaten, and although Sir Hugh was furious with rage and distracted with despair, he had very reluctantly to confess himself foiled; and a heavy snow storm setting in as the night advanced, he came to the conclusion it would be blind folly to keep his tired and jaded men out any longer, and so he ordered the return. He felt that he had been outwitted, and

that his enemies had proved themselves sharper than he in the present instance. But why, he asked himself, had his helpless and innocent daughter been carried off. Everything, so far as he could see, was opposed to the idea that she had been taken away by a lover. The story, as told by the Raven, was that she had been induced to go under the belief that her brother was lying wounded in the neighbourhood. Therefore it was clear that those who had been guilty of the deed were fully aware that Robert was away.

Although Sir Hugh saw the matter in this light, he did not dream for a moment to what extent the brother was responsible for the sister's abduction. But as he wended his way back to his castle, sullen, and morose, and ill at ease, Sir Hugh determined to set off on the morrow for Edinburgh, firstly to see his son, and secondly to invoke His Majesty the King to help him to recover Isobel.

While the father was thus bewailing his fate and making mental vows of pitiless retaliation, the subject of his thought was suffering no less keenly.

From the moment that the attack was made on David, and she herself was seized, it seemed to her that she had hardly time for thought. Blinded and half suffocated by the heavy cloak that had been thrown over her head she could not cry out even if it had been of any use; but after that first wild shriek of terror, she felt that appeals for help could avail her nothing. She was in the hands of enemies. Why, she knew not. Who they were it was impossible to make even a vague guess, while as to the fate that might be in store for her, she did not venture to hazard even a conjecture. Terror deprived her of strength, and she made no effort to free herself from the powerful grasp that held her.

It was a wild, mad ride. It seemed to her that she was the victim of some horrible nightmare. How long the ride lasted it was impossible for her to tell, but it was certainly a long time and many miles must have

been covered. Then the steaming and panting horses were gradually reined in and finally stopped. The wretched girl, faint and weak, was carried by the same powerful arms for some little distance and placed upon a seat, and the cloak was then removed from her head.

It was some moments before she was able to see. Then she discovered that she was in a small, barely-furnished room, and standing over her was a tall, masculine, coarse-looking woman, with blue eyes and a mass of reddish hair. Isobel drew some comfort from the fact of one of her own sex being near her, and looking up to her she asked—

“Who are you?”

“Your enemy,” was the stern answer, given in tones that made the unhappy girl shudder.

“My enemy!” she said; “and wherefore *my* enemy?”

“Because I hate you.”

“Why should you hate me? I have never injured you—never in my life saw you before.”

“Nor I you, and until a little while ago never heard of you. Nevertheless I hate you.”

“Are you mad, or labouring under some delusion, or am I the victim of a cruel mistake?” Isobel asked timidly, and shrinking in terror away from the stern-looking creature before her.

The woman smiled scornfully, and as her large lips parted they revealed a set of white and even teeth.

“I am not mad,” she answered with a sneer, “nor am I labouring under a delusion, nor are you the victim of a cruel mistake.”

“Then tell me why this outrage has been committed upon me?” Isobel said, recovering her presence of mind, and speaking in a commanding tone.

“Because you are the sister of your brother, and your brother has committed an outrage upon us,” the woman answered fiercely.

“An outrage upon us,” Isobel repeated in astonish-

ment. "To whom do you allude when you speak of us? and why should I be made to suffer for my brother's sins?"

The woman drew herself up, and seemed as if she intended to annihilate her victim.

"I am Jean Laing," she said with scorn and pride. "My brother loved and was engaged to one Alie Duncan, but your brother all but took his life, and by specious promises weaned Alie's affections from him. It is to teach your brother that even humble folks are as good as he that you have been brought here. His pride shall be broken, and he shall be compelled now to marry the humble daughter of a hostel keeper, or your life shall pay the forfeit."

As Isobel heard these words, her fair face flushed with burning indignation, and springing from her seat she opposed such a bold front to Jean as to somewhat startle her.

"Jean Laing," she cried, displaying anger that a few moments before she seemed incapable of, "Jean Laing, I know not what you are, nor who you are, nor why you should so unsex yourself as thus to insult a helpless girl. But let me tell you this, that if you think to humble and break my brother through me, you have miscalculated your strength. My brother may have committed an error—a crime, if you like—but for that I am not responsible. Though if you imagine to subdue him by holding me as hostage, you will be circumvented, for I will dash out my brains and thus cheat you. And I bid you beware of my father's vengeance, for you will have to be clever indeed if you escape that."

Jean Laing seemed impressed by the unexpected show of resolution and strength on the part of her victim, but nevertheless she answered fiercely—

"We will take care that you have no chance to dash out your brains, small as they are; while, as for your father's vengeance, we scorn it. He will be taught that our vengeance is to be dreaded also, and that his own

can avail naught against it. You are a witness now that cunning may outmatch strength."

Isobel felt, as she sank back on to the seat and covered her face with her hands, that this was indeed true. She had allowed herself to be trapped by a shallow and even stupid subterfuge, and she positively hated herself for having been so silly and so deaf to the counsels of the Raven, whose experience, as she saw only too clearly now, she ought to have respected. After a pause she turned once more to Jean, who seemed quite unmoved by the poor girl's sorrow, and asked—

"And now that you have made me your prisoner, what do you intend to do with me?"

"Use you as a weapon against your brother, and if needs be, kill you," was the callous answer.

"Indeed," Isobel said with a cold smile of scorn. "You will find possibly, to your cost, that you have misjudged your power."

Jean smiled with equal scorn, for although she had never seen Isobel before and could have no personal feeling against her, she hated her as she had said, and she was especially elated at the success of the daring scheme she and Alie Duncan's brothers had carried out. It was the youngest of these brothers who had gone disguised as a peddler to the Eagle's Nest; it was his hand that struck down David the Raven; and it was the powerful arms of James Duncan that had swung Isobel to his horse, and held her during that terrible ride. The plan of the abduction originated entirely with James.

So far the plotters had triumphed, but they had yet to consider how they were to use their triumph of the present in order to insure success in the future. One thing that troubled them was the sudden disappearance of Malcolm Laing. Under careful nursing he had made a rapid recovery from the wound inflicted upon him by Robert de Burgh; but though he got all right physically it was noticed that his spirits appeared to be utterly

crushed. Hitherto he had been noted for his light-hearted and cheerful disposition. Now he had become sullen, desponding, and melancholy, and seemed to be constantly dwelling upon his misfortune. The name of Alie never crossed his lips; he never went to see her, and yet never reproached her. One day he announced his intention of making a journey. He would not say where he was going to, but informed his friends that he might be absent for some time. That journey was to Edinburgh, where, in the disguise of a palmer, and aided by Alie's younger brother, the goldsmith's apprentice, who had a friend in one of the pages at the palace, he obtained entrance to Holyrood, but only to pass from there to the Tolbooth.

CHAPTER XIV

BY CROOKED WAYS

It is not often that such a marked difference in tastes and ideas is exhibited between father and sons, as in the case of Sir Hugh de Burgh and his two boys.

Sir Hugh himself, as his father and grandfather before him had been, was a border chief with all the crudeness and want of polish begotten by the wild life he had led. Trained from a very early age to the use of arms, and taught to know that he lived in the midst of relentless enemies, against whom he must hold his own by physical force, he had thoroughly imbibed the spirit of the time, and soon became noted for his courage and severity. Proud of his descent from an ancient line of feudal lords, he had striven to uphold the prowess and dash of his ancestors; and collecting together a little army of stalwart fighting men, to whom he endeared himself by an untiring regard for their welfare, he had been able to make his stronghold and the surrounding neighbourhood a small state, as it were, over which he ruled with absolute sway. And he believed himself to be so firmly seated in his position that he had absolutely defied the lawful commands of the monarch of the realm. These family and hereditary characteristics strangely enough seemed to end with Sir Hugh himself, for certainly they were not transmitted to his sons. Very probably they drew their nature from their mother, who was noted for a retiring

and rather timid disposition. At all events, Hugh, the heir had at an early age displayed scholarly and religious tendencies, so that before he was eighteen he allied himself to a monastic order of brethern, and a few years afterwards had set out upon a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the other hand Robert, inflamed no doubt by his early visits to Edinburgh and Carlisle, some family connections residing in the latter town, showed a leaning for the courtier's life. And though his father had carefully trained him to the use of arms, and the lad had ridden in more than one foray, he never attempted to conceal his dislike for the isolation and roughness of the ancestral home; and he sighed for the excitement of town life. It is very probable that it was the knowledge of this which induced Sir Hugh to tender his submission to the King when he did—a submission that King James was very glad to receive, as he was on the point of going to war with England. He knew what a stern, determined, and uncompromising man Sir Hugh was, and, moreover, in the event of war, this feudal lord could bring into the King's service nearly 300 well-trained, well-armed, and hardy fighting men, and that consideration was in itself of great weight. It was very decidedly to the King's interest to have the co-operation of all the great chiefs within his realm in the event of war, especially those who had strongholds on the border, for these men could offer a serious and valuable resistance to an enemy who had the daring to cross the frontier.

All these circumstances combined, naturally told in the favour of Robert de Burgh, and the youth having got a footing in the Court his ambition was inflamed, for it seemed as if the dream and desires of his life were about to be realised. But now at the very threshold of his career he was confronted with that ghastly episode of New Year's night at the hostel of the Lion. From that it seemed to him as if his onward march was to be impeded. He had lulled himself into

a belief that it was not serious, and now the victim of his mad folly had come back from the very shadow of the grave to check his ambitious soarings.

Robert recognised very clearly that he had to face and combat a difficulty of no ordinary kind.

In making the promise to Lady Beatrix that she should have an interview with the presumed palmer, he had no intention that that promise should be carried into effect. Scruples he threw overboard, for he was not going to allow scruples to trouble him when he had so much at stake.

Since he had come to the palace he had taken into his employ, as a body servant, one Peter Beg, whose former master had but recently died, Peter had been a soldier, and was known to be a reckless, devil-me-care sort of a fellow, but bore the reputation of being faithful as a sleuth-hound to those whom he served, Robert had already discovered this characteristic, and had done everything he could to encourage it. As was customary then between a knight and his private servant, a rough sort of friendship had sprung up between the two men, and Peter showed his appreciation of this by an unquestioning obedience to his master's commands.*

Robert now summoned Peter Beg to his presence. Peter was a thick set, powerfully built man; straight as a lath, and with a military gait and bearing. His face was almost stony in its immobility though he had acquired this by schooling himself into it. As a well-

* A private servant to a man of position and wealth in those days was something more than he is in our own time. He was generally the sharer of his master's secrets, the keeper of his purse, the aider and abetter in his liasons and love affairs. He followed his master like a shadow, and was ever ready to assist him in any difficulty, and, if necessary, risk his life on his behalf. Between this class of men there was an unwritten code of honour that was seldom violated, and they were as silent as the grave in respect to their employers' affairs, and faithful to the death. They represented a very distinct *genus* that unhappily became extinct long ago, this result being, no doubt, due to our boasted superior civilisation.

trained war-horse cannot be startled by the sight of moving phalanxes of men, or the sound of booming cannon or rattle of musketry, so Peter Beg seemed utterly incapable of being startled into surprise by anything he saw or heard. At anyrate his bronzed, hard face gave no indication that he possessed even in an infinitesimal degree such a thing as emotion. Anatomically speaking, he of course possessed a heart, but figuratively he was utterly without one, or else it was buried so deeply beneath layers of stony indifference, that it had not the power to give any external indications of its feelings. But there was one feature, however, that redeemed his otherwise statue-like appearance. That feature was his eyes. They at least were not stony or rigid. Deeply sunk in his head, and overhung by coarse, penthouse sort of eyebrows, they seemed to have the power of reading one's very thoughts. Bright as polished steel, and quick as a hawk's, there was nothing that came within their range that could possibly escape them.

Such then was Peter Beg, as making a military salute he stood before his master, and in a deep, mellow voice said—

“You sent for me, Sir Robert?”

“Yes.”

“I am your humble servant, sir.”

“You are aware that a man disguised as a palmer came here to see me?”

“I am.”

“You are also aware that that man is now a prisoner.”

“I am.”

“I wish to see the fellow, without its being known that I have been to see him. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly.”

“Do you think it can be managed.”

“Certainly.”

“Are you acquainted with the Tolbooth?”

"Perfectly."

"How did you get your knowledge?" asked Robert with some curiosity.

"By being confined in it."

"Indeed! When was that, and what for pray?"

"Years ago, and for my late master's sake."

"How was it you came to be imprisoned for his sake?"

"I humbly crave your pardon, Sir Robert, but my late master's secrets are buried with him."

Robert felt rebuked, but his respect and admiration for Peter increased.

"Your remark is deserved," he said. "I had no business to ask such a question. Then you know the Tolbooth well, I presume?"

"Every passage in it, every cell, every room, every stone almost."

"Good. I may have to turn your knowledge to account. Now I wish to visit the false palmer as speedily as possible. You will therefore hold yourself in readiness to accompany me at six of the clock this evening."

"Your commands shall be obeyed."

"Stay, Peter. Do you—do—you think it's possible that a prisoner confined in the Tolbooth, and not charged with any special crime, could—could—*escape*. Do you gather my meaning?"

"Perfectly well."

"And what is your opinion?"

"Commission me to spend ten good Scotch pounds, Sir Robert, and the man shall be free before the sun rises to-morrow morn."

"Good. At six of the clock this evening, Peter," Robert said significantly.

"I am your humble servant, sir," Peter answered with a low bow, as he withdrew from his master's presence.

CHAPTER XV

A CHAINED LION

As six o'clock approached, the day was darkening sullenly to a close. From early morn the sky had been leaden tinted, and not a gleam of light had relieved the oppressive sombreness. The air was raw and chill, and the spirit of confirmed melancholy appeared to be brooding over the town. It was therefore a positive relief to the inhabitants when the robe of night commenced to descend, and the lights in the town served to redeem the funereal aspect of the surroundings.

No one was more anxious for the night to come than Robert de Burgh. The day had been to him a wretched one in every sense. He had been weighted with a sense of impending evil, enhanced no doubt by the dreadful gloom of the day. The restless impatience of youth almost made him curse the laggard hours, while suspense only added to his uneasiness. He was therefore intensely glad as six o'clock drew near. Any excitement, he thought, would be preferable to the stagnation of the dreary day.

He had carefully arrayed himself in a suit of plain dark clothes, unrelieved by a single ornament. He had taken care also to provide himself with a formidable stiletto and a pair of small dirks, such as it was then the fashion for gentlemen to wear. In addition, he carried, suspended from his belt, a long, thin

Spanish rapier in a sheath of maroon velvet.* As the last stroke of the hour of six boomed solemnly out from the great bell clock of the palace, Peter Beg entered his master's presence, bearing a large black hat, known as the "cavalier," and a huge cloak.

Peter himself was by no means an unattractive man, in spite of his stony face. He had a soft, brown beard that relieved this stoniness to some extent, while his hair flowed in graceful curves about a square cut forehead. He was dressed in a closely-fitting dark brown leather jerkin, grey cloth trousers, and long brown leather boots with vandyked tops reaching to the thighs. From a very broad leather belt, fastened with a polished steel clasp, depended a long dagger in a red leather sheath attached to the belt by two small chains; the sheath itself being very tastefully and prettily embroidered with a floral design worked in coloured threads.†

"Have you made the necessary arrangements for our visiting the Tolbooth?" Robert asked, as he enveloped himself in the cloak, and stood before a large mirror to adjust the jaunty cavalier hat with its curled plume; and being thus attired he examined himself from his head with its great mass of brown curls to his crimson leather boots with their gilt spurs, and a smile of satisfaction played about his well-cut mouth, for he knew without the aid of the mirror that he was really a handsome and attractive young man; and the cloak and hat, while answering the purpose of a very effectual

* The rapier was universally worn by gentlemen both in England and Scotland. The blade was long and thin, and so wonderfully tempered that it would almost bend double without snapping. It was frequently inlaid with gold and silver, or as it was called then *damaskeened*, and the handles were encrusted with precious stones, according to the taste and wealth of the owner. In the hands of a skilful and determined man, the rapier was a formidable and deadly weapon.

† This dagger was the only weapon a private servant was allowed to carry in the town, unless under special circumstances.

disguise when needed, were singularly picturesque, and improved the outlines of even a good figure.

"I have, sir," Peter answered, with his usual stolidity, "and I have the necessary papers."

"Good. Let us depart then."

They made their way down a private stairway, and answering the challenge of the sentinels as they passed, gained the Canongate, proceeded at a very rapid pace to the High Street and halted before the Tolbooth.

It was a great pile of buildings, and looked grim and threatening as it loomed up frowningly; its upper portions being lost in the darkness. Through a few of its black-barred windows lights could be observed, but there was such an utter absence of brightness about these lights, that they seemed to typify the human despair, sorrow, and misery within. The whole fabric was an eloquent sermon in stone on man's wickedness and man's cruelty.

Peter Beg led the way to the principal entrance at the bottom of the turret next to St. Giles's Church. Before the gateway, a huge sentinel patrolled backwards and forwards, bearing on one of his massive shoulders a ponderous Lochaber axe. The sentinel stopped, and barred Peter's way as he approached; but Peter gave a sign that was evidently understood, for the man let him pass, and he proceeded to a small door which he pushed open, gaining access to a square chamber, where sat an old grey man, the turnkey. This man, in obedience to a written pass which Peter showed him, came out of his den with a tremendous bunch of keys, with which he proceeded to unlock the heavy oak door at the foot of the tower.

The little grey man panted after his exertion, and paused to get his breath. Then he ushered Peter and Robert in, and closing the door again with a tremendous bang, the visitors found themselves in pitch darkness. Telling them to follow him, the grey old man led the way up a flight of steps, Peter leading his master by the

hand. The head of the steps reached, the turnkey thumped on another door. In the course of a minute a little square hatch was slid back, and a pair of ferret-like eyes and a beetroot nose made themselves visible, the owner of the ferret eyes and beetroot nose having demanded the business of the visitors, and being duly satisfied that it was *bona fide*, shut the hatch again, and after much jingling and jangling of keys, flung open the door, giving admission to a large square stone passage, around which was arranged a series of stone seats. The passage, or "hall" as it was called, was dimly lighted by means of a few flickering oil lamps, whose feeble glimmer was just sufficient to dispel the gloom and make visible a motley group of anxious and haggard-looking men of all ages. These were prisoners who were confined for debt or very small offences, and up to eight o'clock at night they were allowed to lounge about this hall. Here they chatted, discussed, played cards, and made the most of the small modicum of liberty allowed them. A space about four yards back from the entrance, and running the entire width of the passage, was kept clear by means of a strong iron railing. No prisoner, at the peril of his life, was allowed to pass the railing, and all day long two sentinels patrolled the space, each man being armed with a formidable sword and axe. At the opposite end of the hall was a carved pulpit, for it was here also that the prisoners assembled for worship.

Through this crowd of wretched beings, who paused in their various occupations to stare at the visitors, Peter and his master made their way, piloted by the jailor, who opened another door near the pulpit, and having admitted them, he blew a whistle, then closed the door, and locked it again. Robert and Peter found themselves in the dark, and at the foot of another flight of stone steps. In a few moments a third turnkey appeared, and descending with a lanthorn, guided them up to a great passage, on each side of which were the cells where the criminals were confined. One of these

cells was built of iron, and an iron bar was firmly stanchioned to the floor. To this bar condemned felons were chained.

Passing this awful place, in which were two unhappy beings waiting execution, the visitors were led to the office of the captain. This was a well-warmed and tolerably well-furnished room. On the walls were stands of wheel lock muskets, swords and pikes arranged ready for instant use. The captain, or governor of the prison, was a stern and melancholy man, how could he be otherwise when all his surroundings were the acmé of melancholy. He examined the pass Peter presented, and which he had obtained from the commandant of the guard at Holyrood, and finding it *en regle* he asked—

“Which of you two is it who wishes to see the prisoner?”

“I am the one,” Robert answered.

“You are Robert Laudry then.”

“No I——” Robert checked himself at a sign from Peter, who had neglected to tell his master that he had got the pass made out in the name of Robert Laudry. “Pardon me,” De Burgh stammered, “I did not catch what you said at the moment. I am Robert Laudry.”

The captain glanced over the pass again to assure himself of the name, and then looked keenly at Robert. Giving the turnkey instructions to conduct “Robert Laudry” to “Cell 29” he dismissed the visitors from his presence and his mind, and resumed the writing he had been engaged upon when interrupted.

Making their way down a cold, draughty stone passage, where their footsteps echoed hollowly, they suddenly stopped before “Cell 29,” and the turnkey unlocked the door, allowing De Burgh to pass in, but telling Peter he must remain outside.

“You have fifteen minutes, master,” the man said to Robert as he withdrew and locked the door from the

outside, and Robert de Burgh and his victim, Malcolm Laing, were face to face.

The cell was a stone chamber about ten feet square. It was lighted by an oil lamp placed high up in a niche that communicated with the outside passage, the lamp being put in from the outside. The place was bare of any furnishing save a stone seat, and a heap of straw covered with some sacking.

Like a wild animal newly caged Malcolm Laing was pacing up and down the narrow limits of this awful place, that resembled nothing so much as a tomb. He was heavily manacled by an iron belt round his waist, and chains attached to the belt and his wrists and ankles. As he moved about these chains clanked horribly. He stopped in his pacing as the visitor entered, and as Robert kept his hat over his face, and his cloak up to his chin, he did not recognise him.

"Are you friend or foe?" the prisoner asked sullenly, as the other did not speak, but stood surveying the unfortunate young man.

"A foe you think me, perhaps; but a friend I would be," Robert answered still keeping himself muffled up.

"Malcolm went close to him, and by a sudden movement of his manacled hand knocked the visitor's hat off so as to reveal the face, and with a fierce gesture said—

"Either my ears deceive me, or the voice is the voice of Robert de Burgh."

"Your ears do not deceive you," Robert answered sternly, as he stooped and recovered his hat.

Laing grasped his chains menacingly, as between clenched teeth he cried—

"Why have *you* come here?"

"To see you," was the cool answer.

"Behold me then," said Laing, drawing himself up proudly, and extending his chained arms like a cross. "Behold me," he repeated, "and may the sight wither your eyes."

"Your chains and this place might at least teach you

that it were well to keep a guard upon your saucy tongue," Robert remarked with a sneer of triumph.

Laing gathered his chains up in his hands with a fierce nervous clutch, and, striding quite close to De Burgh, he spat in his face and exclaimed—

"Coward—coward and craven, I defy you, and spit at you."

Robert's brow darkened with a dangerous frown, and he half drew his rapier.

"Oh, strike," cried the prisoner, as he extended his arms again, and protruded his breast. "Strike, I say. Have I not spat at you and called you a coward, and would it not be quite in keeping with the character of the coward you are to strike a manacled and defenceless man." Then, in a burst of furious passion, he raised his outstretched hands heavenwards, and exclaimed, "Oh, may God and all His saints curse you!"

Robert felt a little uneasy, for he was not without some of the superstition of the time, and the terrible invocation made him shudder slightly. He thrust his rapier back into its sheath, and then wiping his face with his lace handkerchief said—

"You are a fool. I did not come here to quarrel with you, but to offer you liberty."

"To offer me liberty," Laing retorted with withering irony.

"Yes, I repeat, to offer you liberty. We are both young men, and both have life before us, and though I have done you a grave wrong I am willing and desirous to atone for it, and make such reparation as I can."

Some of the fierceness went out of the prisoner's face at these words, and he said—

"Robert de Burgh, there is one way, and one way only, whereby you can make reparation."

"And what way is that?" Robert asked with some eagerness.

"By making Alie Duncan your wife."

"Pshaw! That is impossible."

"Impossible?" echoed the other, as some of the fierceness came back again, "and why impossible?"

"Because, firstly, my interests lie in another direction; and, secondly, because she is your affianced bride.

Laing breathed heavily, and glared at De Burgh as he cried—

"Did you think of your interests being in another direction when you commenced to poison her mind against me? Did you think of her being my affianced bride when you solemnly pledged your honour to marry her, and you tried to kill me?"

Robert writhed, but he knew it was very greatly to his interests to conciliate the man if possible and not to quarrel with him, so he said—

"No, I frankly confess I did not. But I erred thoughtlessly; and was inflamed and dazzled by the beauty of Alie. Can you not forgive me?"

A cold cynical smile spread itself over the bloodless face of Laing, as he saw how soon his words had come true, that his enemy would be glad some day to parley with him. In measured accents he answered—

"Make Alie Duncan your wife, and the injury you have done to me *shall* be forgiven."

"Why are you so anxious that I should marry her, when she can be your wife for the asking?"

Laing seemed to be struggling with some great shadowy feeling, and for several moments he was unable to speak. Then in a tone of pathetic despair—

"Listen, Robert de Burgh. I am a humble man and a son of the soil; but I had a heart and ambition. Alie Duncan was the light of my life, although I was perfectly conscious that she cared but little for me. I knew that she craved for a far different position to anything that ever I could give her. Still I was fool enough to believe that when once she had become my wife, she would settle down contentedly, and her ambitious dreams would pass away. You opened my eyes to the Fool's Paradise in which I had lived; and

through you I learned how utterly I had been deceived. Now I stand before you a ruined, crushed, and broken-hearted man, and these prisoner's chains that you have riveted upon me have cankered my soul. But all this I will forgive if you but make Alie Duncan your true and honourable wife."

He spoke as if moved by some strange inspiration, and his forcible earnestness and stirring pathos took from him all that was vulgar, sordid, or weak, and touched him, so to speak, with a glory that belonged to a world where the utter selfishness of human nature was not known. His white, thin face had warmed into a crimson glow, and his sunken eyes gleamed with an unnatural light. His *pose*, too, was one in which art seemed typified. Slightly leaning forward, in an attitude of intense appeal, his soft hair falling with a certain poetic wildness about his forehead, his not unattractive features stamped with a marvellous expression of strained intensity—an expression that embodied in an eminent degree hope, despair, yearning; his out-stretched hands, from which depended his manacles, that only served to add an irresistible force to the picture, completed a study, as it were, that was wonderful, as embodying all the elements of human emotion.

Robert de Burgh was for a few fleeting moments touched and moved, and the voice of his better nature struggled to make itself heard. But visions came before him; visions of Lady Beatrix; of Court favour; of power, rank, title, wealth, and he would indeed have exhibited human qualities that would have been all but sublime had he blinded himself to these things.

"I know not what the motives are that prompt you to offer yourself up as a living sacrifice on the altar of devotion; they concern yourself, but you place before me an impossible condition. I will set you free, and bestow upon you a large sum of money, on the understanding that you marry Alie."

Malcolm Laing's whole manner changed again, as,

livid with passion and quivering with destructive desire, he hissed at Robert like an enraged serpent—

“May a torturing pest seize upon your vitals and slowly wither you. Think you that I want your doubly accursed money? Think you that I would marry a woman who would loathe and hate me? Think you that I would sell myself and my soul for your gold?”

De Burgh was startled and even alarmed by the furious outburst, but assuming an air of determination, he said—

“Men in chains are scarcely in a position to dictate terms.”

“Fool,” Laing exclaimed, “I fling the taunt back in your teeth. Listen, and let the words I am going to say sink into your soul. Solemnly I swore on the symbol of my faith, a binding oath that you should not, *while my heart beat, wrong Alie Duncan*. Now, draw your sword and stop the beating of my heart, an it so please you, but do not think that that will clear you. After me come five brothers of Alie, and they are all bound by oath also to revenge injury and wrong to her. You may sweep them off the face of the earth, but after them come my kinswomen and kinsmen, and you will indeed bear a charmed life if you escape us all. Again, I say beware. Your steps will be dogged and your movements watched, and in that moment when you think yourself most secure and most triumphant, you will be crushed.”

Robert felt uncomfortable and troubled. He saw very clearly that he could not hope to successfully combat the forces that were arrayed against him. It was clear, therefore, that he had no alternative but to come to terms with the enemy.

“Before you attempt to dictate terms to me you should be free?” he said. “I offer you liberty. Will you accept it?”

“On what conditions?”

“I name none.”

"And how am I to be set free?"

"I do not exactly know, but you will be aided to escape."

"To escape," Laing repeated thoughtfully, and revolving the matter over in his own mind. Then he said, "this is a strange proposal as coming from you? Why do you make it?"

"That is my own affair," Robert answered, with something of his old arrogance.

"You have not forgotten that I have sworn that you shall not wrong Alie Duncan?" said Laing, with some contempt in his tone and manner.

"I have *not* forgotten that you said so."

"Then do you think that my being free will cause me to forget my oath?"

"I think nothing at all about it nor do I care. In spite of your oath I offer you liberty. Do you accept the offer?"

Laing hesitated. He was a little puzzled what to think.

"Yes. I take your offer," he said at last. "But I tell you now while I am yet in your power that if Alie Duncan becomes not your wife, no other living woman shall."

De Burgh curled his lip in scorn, though there was a sense of fear at his heart that this man might yet prove his ruin.

"I don't admit that you are the arbiter of my fate," he answered, "but we will not discuss the point. I will endeavour to give you liberty."

Further conversation was stopped by the turnkey opening the door and announcing that the time of interview had expired. Without another word or even a look at the prisoner De Burgh left the cell. Peter was waiting for him outside, and they made their way out together; and when they had left the gloomy prison behind Robert said to his servant—

"Peter, the man I have been to see in the Tolbooth

must be allowed to go free. Can it be managed, do you think ?”

“ I think it can. When is he to go ? ”

“ To-morrow, if possible.”

“ Good, my master.”

Robert felt that it was not necessary to say anything more on the subject, and closely muffling his face again he hurried back to the Palace.

CHAPTER XVI

GOLD IS MORE POWERFUL THAN PRISON BARS

WHEN Peter Beg told his master that a prisoner confined in the Tolbooth might be released without any considerable difficulty he spoke, of course, within limits; for he knew perfectly well that those who were confined there for treason or other serious crimes, the penalty of which was death, had little hope of ever tasting freedom again. But given an ordinary prisoner, and the necessary influence, there were ways and means whereby he might be liberated. One of these "ways and means" was Peter's uncle, who occupied the position of a turn-key in the prison; and Peter's uncle being a man who held no very exalted moral views, but was ground firmly and immovably in the faith that money was the *sumum bonum* of all human happiness, and who further believed that when wealth was distributed he—Peter's uncle—had been undeservedly left out of the reckoning, and that consequently he was perfectly justified in attempting to acquire his proportion by every possible means that presented themselves.

Now Peter Beg being well acquaint with his uncle's little weaknesses, determined to profit by them in the present instance.

Early in the morning following on the night of Robert de Burgh's visit to the Tolbooth, Peter Beg made his way to the den of his uncle, the said den being a small

and malodorous chamber in one of the turrets of the grim old prison.

Peter's uncle was snuffy and grey and bald, and the expression of his haggard face might have led one to conclude that he had found the faith he held far from comforting, for this expression taken in conjunction with his small, bleared, red eyes, was rather suggestive of a hunted rat.

Peter's uncle expressed great delight at seeing his dear nephew, who did not often honour him with a visit, so that Peter's uncle had hitherto been under the impression that his dear nephew considered himself to be so infinitely higher in the social scale, that to stoop to an association with a humble turnkey was not for a moment to be thought of. Finding himself in error, as evidenced by the fact that his dear nephew was actually present in the den, Peter's uncle made haste to atone by introducing some very good cappie ale, which was duly discussed. And when certain questions had been asked, as to how the new master was liked, and what was the prevailing opinion in the palace as to the King's likelihood of going to war with the English barbarians, all of which questions were as near as possible answered in monosyllables by the dear nephew, the little snuffy old man found his repertoire exhausted, and he proceeded to the concoction of more cappie ale, and deriving new inspiration therefrom, he found a fruitful theme in the weather, until Peter, considering that the matter was not one of mutual interest, drew forth from a pocket inside of his jerkin a leather bag, from which he took ten good Scotch pounds, and having laid them out in a row on the greasy table that was the main article of furniture in the den, he said—

“Uncle, do you see that money?”

The question was absolutely superfluous, for from the moment that the first metallic clink had unmistakably proclaimed the presence of gold the little red eyes had blazed up with the fire of intense longing, and they had

watched every movement of the fingers with an eagerness such as would have been displayed by a wild animal watching its prey. And when the whole of the ten glittering pieces lay in a goodly row the haggard face seemed to say—"Ah! ah! my dear nephew, much as I love you I do not think I could resist breaking the seventh commandment, for the sake of such a magnificent treasure as those ten gold coins."

So riveted were all his faculties that he seemed not to hear the question that was addressed to him, and in consequence his dear nephew repeated it. It was then that Peter's uncle, making that watery gurgle of the mouth which some people cannot resist when a lemon is sliced in their presence, exclaimed, as his small red eyes dilated in a marvellous manner—

"Don't I, just!"

An essayist given much to moralising might have found in the way that "*Don't I, just*," was uttered an exhaustless theme for preaching a grand and stirring homily on human sordidness.

"Well," said the dear nephew in his stolid stony way, "each of those ten pieces shall pass into your absolute possession on one condition."

"What is the condition?" asked Peter's uncle in a short, raspy voice as his vein-marked, brown, withered hands stretched with a nervous instinctiveness towards the money.

"That within twenty-four hours *No. 29* is a free man."

Peter's uncle scratched his bald head as if for inspiration, rubbed his brown hands one about the other, opened and shut his little red eyes, and then in a slobbering tone, as if the nerves of his mouth were still being acted on by lemon juice, said—

"I'll do it."

There was something in the way in which the "I'll do it" was uttered that seemed to imply that he *would* do it even though in the doing of it he was called upon

to face a certain personage whose name it is not necessary to write.

It was obvious that the dear nephew was impressed by this something, for he gathered up the ten pieces, restored them to the leather bag, tied the string of the bag tightly round the neck, and handed it to his uncle with the remark—

“Take care that you don’t get your throat cut for it.”

Seizing the bag as a hungry dog seizes a bone that is tossed to it, and with a snarl not unlike a dog, Peter’s uncle first weighed the bag in his skinny hand as if to make sure that his beloved nephew had not abstracted the coins again by some subtle magic; and being convinced that he really did possess the treasure, he thrust it into his hairy bosom, placing it over the spot where, if in his weazened anatomy such a thing existed, his heart beat. Then with an unpleasant leer and grin he said—

“Nobody will ever cut my throat, because nobody has any idea that I have got any money, and I’ll take good care nobody does know.” Having thus delivered himself he asked—“Any instructions for No. 29?”

“Not a word. You can give him these things to use if he should require them, and you might point out to him the shortest route between him and the street.

These things consisted of two small but powerful files, and about thirty feet of silken cord, that while being thin and flexible was so made that it would bear a strain of several hundredweight.

Peter’s uncle took the articles, and secreted them in a locker in his den, and, having concocted two more bowls of cappie ale, the interesting interview ended, and Peter Beg took his departure.

In the course of the afternoon Peter’s uncle, in his capacity as turnkey in that part of the prison where was situated cell 29, entered the cell to give the prisoner his supper. But he also gave him something more than his supper, for he handed him a small flat parcel, con-

taining two files and a silken cord, and as he did so he said—

“Somebody interested in you requested me to give you this parcel.”

The prisoner received the parcel in sullen silence, and without manifesting the slightest interest or excitement. Peter’s uncle was a little disappointed, for he was not without curiosity, and he would have liked to have learnt the prisoner’s history. As there seemed to be no possibility of that, however, he turned to leave the cell, but on reaching the door he halted, and looking at Laing, who sat on his stone seat, like a figure of despair, he said—

“I ought to tell you that the sentry on duty to-night in the street below is a powerful and rather savage man, from the northern mountains. It’s now three years ago since a prisoner managed by some means to get through the doorway on to the street, but he didn’t get any farther, for that same sentry clove his skull completely through with his Lochaber axe. I wish you better luck.”

The old villain grinned horribly, and feeling that he was revenged for the prisoner’s taciturnity, he took his departure. When he was once more alone, Laing started from his assumed lethargy, hastily opened the parcel and examined its contents; and without a moment’s delay he set to work with one of the files, for with the means of acquiring liberty came the zest for liberty. The file bit keenly, and in the course of an hour he had freed his legs from the shackles. Then he commenced with the other file on the iron bands round his wrists, but owing to his being able to use only one hand for this, the labour was slow and tedious, and nearly two hours were consumed before he had filed through so far that he was enabled to wrench the parts asunder. His right wrist was still to be freed, and this process was longer and more tedious, but he succeeded at last just before the night inspection was being made previous to

the extinguishing of the lights. This inspection was of a very slipshod kind. It consisted of the captain going round with two or three of his guard, and knocking on the door of each cell, calling out as he did so "Number —" (whatever the number was), "are you within?" The prisoner had to answer "Yes."

The light was then extinguished from the outside, and the inmate of the cell was left in darkness.

Malcolm Laing thus found himself in darkness just as he had freed his limbs from the galling and degrading fetters. He was exhausted with the labour he had already gone through, for he was still ill and weak from the effects of his wound, which even yet had not properly healed. But freedom loomed in the distance, and if he would escape he must have cleared the prison long before the morning dawned.

By dint of great perseverance he managed to move the massive stone that served for a seat until under the window, so that he was enabled to mount up and just reach the bars. These bars were old and rusty, and when he gave one a vigorous jerk the lower part came away from its socket in the stonework, and then he was able to wrench it quite clear. The other one was in better condition, and it cost him infinite and painful labour to file through it. He paused often and anxiously, fearing lest the sounds of the file had drawn attention to his cell; but the stillness of the night was only broken occasionally by the drowsy sentries drawling the hour.

Hitherto he had worked in the dark, but now the moon commenced to rise much to his alarm, as the light would lessen his chances of escape. But having so far succeeded he was not now going to despair.

The iron bars were no longer an impediment. Both of them were removed. The window itself, composed of small diamond panes let into leaden sashes, offered no difficulty. It was very old, and from the first had never been constructed with a view to such an eventuality as

the escape of a prisoner, for the bars were considered quite sufficient protection. As he forced the window open a breath of cold night air blew refreshingly on his sweat-damp forehead.

He paused and rested for some little time. Then by dint of considerable perseverance he managed to pull himself up so that he could look out. All was quiet. The crescent moon gazed down on a sleeping city. Nothing seemed to stir. There was not a sound save the whispering voice of the breeze.

Laing clambered down from his perch, and unfolding the silken cord he measured it by stretching out his arms, calculating that he had thirty feet of the cord.

Laing's next proceeding was to secure one end of the cord round the two iron bars, and then place the bars longitudinally across the lower part of the window aperture.

The supreme moment had come, and the fugitive prepared to make the last effort for his freedom. He knew now that his life trembled in the balance. His heart beat wildly, and his brain throbbed. Excitement lent him strength, but his courage did for a moment fail him. It was only for a moment though. He tightened the upper part of the cord between the outside of the window and the bars inside. Then he wriggled out, and was dangling in mid air. To relieve the strain on his hands he twisted his leg round the cord, and commenced to slide slowly down, stopping now and then to listen for the tread of the sentry, but all was still silent. Slowly and cautiously he continued to descend, until he was horrified to find that he had come to the end of the cord, and he was yet a long way from the ground—so far that to have dropped from there on to the rough stones of the street would have been death, or fractured limbs at least.

A feeling of horrible, sickening despair came over him as he realised his position. The blood seemed to surge up round his brain, and he felt as if his senses were

leaving him. He tried to go up the rope again, but his arms were weakened by the great strain they had had to endure, and the sinews were quivering from over tension. Moments passed, they verily seemed hours, for they were moments of supreme agony. It appeared as if with the end of that rope the end of his life had also come, but just when he felt as if it was utterly impossible to hold on any longer, he espied an iron waterspout running down the wall about three or four feet from him. New hope gave him new strength. By swinging himself like a pendulum, he managed to get hold of the spout, but even then his situation was critical in the extreme. He still held the rope with one hand, until feeling about with his feet he got a resting place on an iron pin, one of several that kept the spout to the wall. Inserting his fingers well between the wall and the spout, and resting his foot on the pin, he gave a great sigh, and let the rope swing from him.

When he had rested a little, he commenced to descend slowly, by bracing his feet against the wall, and stretching his body out the full length of his arms like a crescent. In this manner he managed with the extremest difficulty to work down. It seemed as if the awful descent never would come to an end; but at last he realised that he was within six feet of the street. He paused and listened again, but still all was silent. He was very hot with the tremendous exertion he had endured and yet the night was bitterly cold fortunately for him, for the guard whose duty it was to patrol that part of the street, had ensconced himself in his watch box and gone to sleep.

With one more effort the fugitive reached the ground, and he could scarcely suppress a cry of joy as he realised that so far he was safe and a free man. But he paused only sufficiently long to regain his breath and straighten his cramped back, then like a frightened animal he sped silently away in the darkness.

A few days after the events just narrated, Peter Beg presented himself before his master and said—

“A special messenger has brought a letter from your father, Sir Robert.”

Robert tore open the missive and read—

“Your sister—my beloved child Isobel—has been stolen away, and David the Raven lies nigh unto death through grievous wounds bestowed upon him by the villains who have committed this crime against my house. Ride hard and come to your home at once, that we may devise means how best to recover your sister and revenge this wrong. This comes from—in great distress and sorrow—your loving father, DE BURGH. You will present my humble and loyal duty to His Majesty the King, and acquaint him with our grievous loss.”

CHAPTER XVII

A LOVE PLEDGE

THE receipt of the letter from his father did not, as may be imagined, tend to calm Robert's already ruffled feelings. He was tenderly attached to his sister, and her abduction under any circumstances would have been a source of unspeakable pain to him. But now, in addition to this, it filled him with a nameless dread, because an unmistakable instinct told him that his sister's disappearance was associated with his own folly at the hostel of the Lion. It needed no very subtle reasoning on his part to determine this, for, first, he was perfectly well aware that Alie Duncan had a number of brothers who were not likely to sit calmly and with folded hands while their sister suffered; second, the fact of Malcolm Laing resorting to that dangerous subterfuge of gaining access to Holyrood Palace in the disguise of a palmer, proved that the matter was not to be allowed to drop, and, third, David the Raven being wounded "nigh unto death," was confirmation strong in Robert's mind that Isobel's abduction was part of a daring plot which had been organised by his enemies, who also had good grounds to feel enraged with the Raven, for the part he had played.

Now, if these surmises were correct, and Robert could not dissuade himself from believing that they were, he had a new and very difficult factor to deal with, and one that was likely to upset all his previous calculations.

One thing there was no mistaking, and that was, that

he was the centre of a network of difficulties. On the one side of him were high position, power, fame, wealth. On the other, ruin, disaster, perhaps death. If he broke his engagement with Beatrix Thirlstane, he would incur the wrath of the King, and banishment in disgrace from the kingdom would be the very lightest penalty he might expect. But even assuming that by some chance not then clear to him, he could escape the King's anger, and he were to marry Alie Duncan, his father's anger he could not escape. Sir Hugh was a stern, uncompromising, proud and revengeful man, and the son knew only too well that his life would not be safe from the parental wrath. Therefore he would have to seek safety in a foreign country, where, seeing that he was totally dependent on his father for his fortune, he would be compelled to live in humiliating poverty.

"If I go in to win what I have set my mind on winning, what are my chances of success?" he mused. "First let me see the forces that are arrayed against me. There is Alie Duncan, though I have yet to learn what part she is likely to play. But even if she should be violent, I must not forget that I am a man and she is a woman, and a man who cannot win a woman to his side is a fool. Then there are her brothers and Malcolm Laing. The latter has shown that he is not likely to compromise. I have done wrong in showing him a way out of the safe keeping of the Tolbooth. I might have quietened the scruples of Lady Beatrix, but Macolm is not so easy to deal with. As for Alie's brothers it may or may not be difficult to render them harmless. It remains to be seen. Any way the battle is not lost yet. I will fight it out. But first of all I must ascertain where my sister is, and endeavour to restore her to the Eagle's Nest."

Thus having, so far as he could, determined the course he would pursue, he sent a message to Lady Beatrix, asking her to favour him with an interview

that evening, a request that she readily complied with, and she appointed the hour of eight for him to visit her. Punctually to the time he joined her in her boudoir. She saw by the troubled expression on his face that something was wrong, and greeting him with more than the usual warmth, said—

“You have some sorrow. I read it in your face. Am I to be your confidante?”

“Not only may you read it in my face, but in this also,” he answered, as he handed to her his father’s letter.

She perused it with evident agitation, and said—

“This is ill news indeed. Your sister stolen away.” There was a pause, then suddenly she asked—

“Had your sister a lover?”

“No.”

“How know you that?”

“I am sure of it. She was under the care of an aunt, who is watchful as a hawk, jealous as a Moor.”

“Still even Maidens who are closely watched may sometimes have lovers,” she persisted.

“True,” he answered, “but I am sure my sister had not.”

“Why then has she been carried off? If not for love then it must be for revenge.”

He started as if she had struck him, and he was quite conscious that the colour faded from his face. This woman always seemed to make guesses that came so near the truth, that they startled him out of his presence of mind, and betrayed him into showing a sense of guilt.

“Why for revenge,” he asked in that nervously irritable way which some men show when they think they have been detected in a fault.

“Nay, love of mine, I know not,” she answered so tenderly as to reassure him.

“But why should you think it possible that any one should want to be revenged on my poor sister, who is

as gentle as a lamb and as harmless as a dove?" he asked.

"If I think at all in the matter, I should say your sister has been abducted as an act of revenge against the family, and not from any personal feeling against her."

He was again annoyed at her speech, for, wittingly or unwittingly, it was another guess at a truth.

"Perhaps you are right," he said in answer to her last remark and concealing the annoyance he felt. And then wishing to change the subject he said—"I have yet another piece of unpleasant news to give you. My servant Peter informs me that he heard in the city this afternoon that the false palmer whom you wished to see has effected a successful escape from the Tolbooth."

"Escaped from the Tolbooth!" Beatrix echoed, as she cast upon him such a look as caused him to shrink within himself as it were, and for a moment his better nature rising up he was tempted to throw himself at her feet and, confessing all, sue for her pardon. But here again was he infirm of purpose, and he allowed the good impulse to pass without obeying it.

"Yes, escaped," he answered. "How I know not yet. I tell you the news as it has come to me."

"The mystery deepens, Robert," Beatrix remarked with point, and regarding him with a look of suspicion and doubt.

Her last remark worried him, and he betrayed his petty weakness in the reply he made.

"It is a pity you have so little faith in me, Lady Beatrix."

"You wrong me, Robert. I *have* faith in you," she answered with touching tenderness. "Do not destroy it," she added pleadingly.

"I will try not to destroy it, Beatrix. Oh! would that I could show you how much I love you. Perhaps I am unworthy of *your* love, but I will strive to merit

it, to purge myself, for your dear sake, of all that is evil."

"Ah, my own true love, you make me *so* happy," she murmured.

He felt then that if he could only have cut from him that tangled web which he himself had woven, he would have made any sacrifice; and in her love he would have found true happiness. Her gentle influence had softened him into feeling shame with himself, and there was deep earnestness and true sincerity in what he said—

"Will the good God I adore place me in a position to always make you happy."

"Amen to that," she murmured reverentially. There was another pause. Then—"Tell me sweetheart what are you going to do in your sister's business?"

"I know not yet, but I must set out to-morrow for my home."

"Alas! so soon," she cried.

"Even so soon, sweet love. It is my duty—duty to my poor sister and to my father."

"Go then, for Beatrix Thirlstane would die rather than keep you from the path of duty," she answered impressively. "Have you the King's permission to go?" she asked.

"No. But I shall crave audience of the King to-morrow morning to tell him of the sorrow that has come upon our house, and to give him my father's message."

"Bestow upon me before you go," she said, looking pleadingly into his eyes, "some tiny token of your love, so that I may constantly gaze upon it while you are away, and know how dear to me my true knight is."

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then, opening the collar of his tunic, he took from off his neck a thin gold chain, to which was attached a small ivory medallion portrait of a handsome lady of middle age. It was exquisitely set in a gold frame inlaid with diamonds and rubies.

"Take this into your keeping in trust," he said. "It is the portrait of my sainted mother. Since she died it has never left me. I have worn it over my heart as a talisman, and I prize it far beyond my own life. And remember these words, Beatrix, for I speak them solemnly, *if ever I seem to waver in my faith to you, hold that medallion before my eyes and utter the words—YOUR MOTHER.* The sight of it and those words will be a magic charm that will bring me a willing slave to your feet."

With eager outstretched hands she grasped the portrait, and looking intently at it for some moments, pressed it to her lips and murmured as if in prayer—

"Dear, dear mother, plead for me in your place on high that I may be made worthy of your noble son." Then turning to him, and before he could give utterance to something he was going to say, she continued—"Ah, Robert, how good you are. With my life I shall guard this. Neither night nor day shall it leave me, for while I keep it I keep your love, for it gives me the power to bring your love back if it wanders. Said you not so, dear one?"

"Those were my words," he answered, beginning to regret already his hastiness in giving her the portrait for he treasured it more than aught else he possessed.

She put the chain round her neck and the medallion in her bosom, and as she did so she murmured with great fervency—

"Rest there, dear charm, more precious to me now than all the wealth of the world, for while you lie over my heart the love of the man I love is mine. And now adieu, dear Robert," she cried as she flung her arms around his neck. "I am pledged to the Countess of Dunstan to be in her chamber at nine of the clock, and I must go, or she will be sore distressed. But promise me, sweetheart, that before you set forth to-morrow you will try to give me one parting kiss. Oh, cruel to-morrow that takes from me my lover."

"I promise you," he said, as he returned her embrace. Then she gave him many kisses, and sighing left him. And when the door had closed upon her retreating form; when the influence of her presence had passed away, his troubles rose up again around him like the surge of an angry sea; and beating his forehead with his hand he cried—

"What have I done, what have I done. I must either break her heart or treacherously mislead her."

CHAPTER XVIII

HE OF THE PUMPKIN FACE

THE long, weary hours of the night were passed by Robert in feverish restlessness begotten of the mental anxiety from which he was suffering. Snatches of sleep did come to him, but it was sleep fevered with troubled dreams.

So far, of course, he was in perfect ignorance as to what attitude Alie Duncan had assumed towards him. She had preserved a silence which kept him in the dark. Did she bear any love for him? If so, to what extent would that love carry her? On the other hand, was she only actuated by a vain ambition that would make her merciless and pitiless, and, in the event of that ambition being thwarted, would she become as revengeful as Nemesis, and pursue him to his ruin?

These and similar questions revolved themselves in his troubled brain, until at length he came to the determination to set all doubts at rest by going to see her.

He was up betimes the following morning, and at once availed himself of his privilege as "a gentleman of the Court" to present a humble request to the King to grant him an interview.

The King readily granted this favour, although it was midday before Robert could obtain his audience. The King listened to the story of Isobel's abduction with considerable interest, and expressed strong indig-

nation at the outrage. And he promised that if the "rogues who had committed the outrage" could be brought to justice, they should be severely punished. Robert, having thanked His Grace, was about to withdraw, when the King said—

"We trust, Sir Robert, that your absence on this painful business will not be unnecessarily prolonged. We have need of the youth of our Court at the present juncture of affairs, and we have been seriously thinking of offering you a position in our household. But perhaps this won't influence your quick return so much as the knowledge that there is one heart here that will be lonely while you are absent, and will rejoice when you come back."

Robert felt as if his doom was being sealed with these words, for they unmistakably indicated that the King had quite set his mind on this marriage, and Robert saw only too clearly now that at every hazard and every cost he must clear the obstacles away, and make the Lady Beatrix his wife.

Kneeling at the King's feet he said—

"Your Grace confers too high an honour on a most unworthy subject. Though I be absent in body my heart will remain here."

The words were few but to the point, and the King was evidently pleased with him, for he smiled, and stretching out his jewelled hand he allowed Robert to touch it with his lips, and then he dismissed him with a "God speed."

De Burgh was only too glad to get away from the royal presence, and as the day was far advanced he determined to set out immediately; but his going was still further delayed by a message which was waiting him from Lady Beatrix, requesting him, "for love's sake," to give her "one little minute of farewell" before he went.

So he went to her, and when he came into her presence he assumed a look of intense pleasure, and

returned her warm greeting with greetings equally warm.

"Ah, love," she murmured, "I could not let you go without one more embrace, and so I sent for you. Did I wrong, my beloved?"

"On the contrary, sweetheart."

She uttered a deep sigh, not a sigh of sorrow but of joy, which betrayed how his words went to her heart.

"You make me so happy," she murmured in dulcet tones. "When do you leave, sweet love?" she asked, after a long pause.

"Immediately. The horses are already waiting."

"Ride you with an escort?"

"No. My servant, Peter, will be my only companion."

"And why so?" she asked, with a look of alarm on her face. "Know you not that the roads are dangerous, and there are many wicked characters abroad?"

"I have no fear," he answered. "I am young, and trained in the use of arms, and Peter is bold as a lion. I warrant me we should give good account of any half-dozen rascals who should have the audacity to attack us."

"You are so brave and noble," she murmured, looking at him with a look of pride and admiration. "But for my sake, dear heart, run no risks. I beseech you take some of the King's guard with you."

"It is impossible," he answered with a shade of irritability in his manner that did not escape her observation.

"As you will, my love," she said with a sigh of resignation. "I did but suggest it out of the love I bear for you. If it so pleases you to go alone, go and I will pray heaven to watch over you."

He felt the reproach, and conscious shame burned itself upon his cheeks and temples. He kissed her saying, "Be not angry with me, darling."

"Nay, God forbid I should be angry with *you*," she cried with great earnestness. "A woman is not often angry with the man who is dearer to her than life."

"I fear me I have been a little unkind," he said, "but I am troubled much about my dear sister, and my mind seems to be confused."

"Ah, dear, dear Robert," she exclaimed, all tenderness and solicitude again. "How earnestly do I sympathise with you, how truly do I share your sorrow. By this image of your dear mother—she drew forth from her bosom the medallion he had given her and pressed to his lips—I solemnly vow that there is no pang, no sorrow, no anxiety, no trouble, that you could suffer that would not be reflected in my breast."

The sight of the portrait almost tempted him into asking her to restore it to him then and there. But he checked himself, and notwithstanding that he was strangely agitated, he managed by a great effort to conceal his feelings, and said in a tone that quite lacked warmth or earnestness—

"I am indeed blessed in the possession of such a treasure as yourself. And now, my heart, I must tear myself away. Farewell is a heavy word to utter, but it must be spoken."

She wept, and hid her face on his breast to hide her tears. In a few minutes she had calmed herself, and removing from her neck a tiny cross of gold, on which was a figure of Christ, she said—

"I never knew my parents. My father was killed before I was born, and my dear mother, having given me as a hostage to fortune, went to join my father. She died here, amongst strangers, in what was to her a strange land, and with her was buried the history of her life, nothing of which I have ever been able to learn. Dying, she requested that this cross should be given to me. It was all she had in the wide world to bestow, save her dying blessing. She kissed the cross with her latest breath, and her last words were to those who stood near her—'For the dear Lord's sake, fail not to give this symbol to my child, and say, when she is old enough to understand you, that so long as she wears

that cross and never parts from it, it shall be as a charm and a blessing, bringing peace when she is troubled, repose when she is weary, contentment when she is discontented, hope when she is tempted to despair.' So spoke my dying mother, and speaking so—died." She paused to wipe away her tears and recover from her emotion, then resumed—"Good King James, to whom the matter was told, had the words engrossed upon a parchment, and made a vow that when I was old enough he himself would give them and the cross to me. He faithfully fulfilled that vow when I was nine years old. I have told you this sad story that you may know how great is the store I set upon this dear cross, for not only is it a link between me and my dead mother, whose soul God rest, but it has indeed brought me comfort, peace and hope. And now in return for the medallion you have given me, I bestow it upon you, and repeating the dying words of my own dear mother, I say it shall be as a charm and a blessing to you, bringing you peace when you are troubled, repose when you are weary, contentment when you are discontented, hope when you are tempted to despair."

She ceased and held the trinket in her small, white hand for him to take. But he literally shrank away, and his face was blanched to the whiteness of the hand that was outstretched towards him, and that hand was of the lily's whiteness. He felt that he dare not touch that sacred symbol with its hallowed associations of dying mother and loving and pious child.

"It is better for me not to take a relic that is sanctified to you by such tender memories," he stammered.

She gazed at him with tearful eyes.

"Nay, take it, dear one," she pleaded. "The very memories that cling around it, and the blessings of a dying mother, who trembling on the threshold of the Great Unknown thought only of her child, shall hallow it even for you. And between you and me it shall be a bond, until the stronger bond of marriage makes us

one. Then shall you return it to me and I will give you back the medallion portrait of your own dear mother."

"Swayed by the potency of her presence and voice, and acting almost like a man who slept and dreamed, he took the cross and hung it round his neck by means of the small chain to which it was suspended. A look of intense pleasure spread itself over her face, and raising her hand, while an almost unnatural light blazed in her eyes, and her whole manner was that of a person labouring under intense devotional feeling, she said, in deep, impressive tones—

"Robert de Burgh, as you and I hope some day to stand before the Throne of Mercy, I charge you in the name of your dead mother and my dead mother, to guard that cross with your life, and never to part from it while you live until you restore it to me. On your knightly honour swear to do this."

He was still like a man in a dream. He was still irresistibly swayed by that strange magic that she seemed to exert over him. And though something seemed to prompt him to tear the cross from his neck, and dashing it at her feet flee from her seductive presence, a something stronger kept him back, and he found himself, in obedience to her request, raising his hand solemnly and vowing on his knightly honour what she bade him vow.

His brain was in a whirl, his senses were confused, the very apartment seemed to be spinning round his head.

He caught her in his arms as she sprang towards him. On her snow-white forehead he pressed his hot lips, and half expected to see that they had blistered her; then he hurried away, getting to his own apartment he knew not how; and when a few minutes later he was riding out of the city in company with Peter Beg, he felt very much like one who had gone through a distracting dream and had only just awoke.

He drew a long breath. He removed his bonnet that

the cold air might fan his heated forehead ; and having got clear of the town and gained the open country, he suddenly spurred his horse into its fastest gallop, much to the amazement of Peter, who began to think that his master was either drunk or very mad, and putting spurs to his own horse he followed at the same break-neck pace.

The day had waned and given place to the duskiness of night, only relieved by a few glimmering stars that struggled to make themselves visible in the murk above, when the travellers reined in their panting and foam-flecked horses at the door of the hostel of the Lion.

The place had a very different appearance now from what it wore when Robert last stopped there. Then it was brilliant with light and festive with New Year's merriment. Now the building looked one black mass in the darkness that surrounded it. No sounds came from it, and save for one dim light in an upper window it might have been a house of the dead, and even that light was suggestive of a "watch-light" at the head of one departed.

The wild ride had somewhat restored Robert's bewildered senses, and, as he stopped before this house, which seemed so conspicuously associated with his fate, he began to realise that he was taking a bold step in once more tempting his destiny by seeking shelter in the place. If, however, it had been merely a question of shelter, he would have ridden by, although that would have necessitated his travelling all through the night. But there was a far stronger motive than the mere gratification of the animal wants.

In accordance with a custom of the time, when gentlemen of position travelled without escort, he had clothed himself in a humble garb—a plain, brown buckskin jerkin, such as was worn by the common people, and untanned leather boots, with iron spurs.*

* The spurs generally denoted the quality of the rider, and were frequently of a very costly description, occasionally being set with

But he had gone farther than this, and had taken advantage of the custom to disguise himself in such a manner that it would have been difficult for his most intimate friend to have recognised him. When he was last at the hostel he wore a short, very youthful beard.

His beard he had since shaved off, and had cultivated a moustache, but, as this was only small, he wore a large, bushy false one over it. He had even allowed his hair to grow long, so that this and the fierce looking moustache together so effectually changed his facial appearance that he might have defied detection anywhere.

So far as Peter's garb was concerned, it was very similar to his master's. Each man, however, was heavily armed, though his weapons were concealed, save the dirk which everyone, rich and poor, travelled with.

At his master's bidding, Peter descended from his horse, and rapped on the door, and rapped and rapped again before the upper window, where the light was to be seen, was opened, and a voice demanded to know who sought admission. The voice was the voice of James, the eldest son.

"Two poor travellers who want food and shelter for themselves and beasts," Peter answered.

"Whence come you, and where go you?" James asked.

"We come from Edinburgh, where we have been transacting business, and we are returning to our homes in Berwick."

"An you be honest men you shall have what you seek," said James.

diamonds, when the wearers were wealthy people; but at all times, amongst the upper classes, being chased with gold or silver, according to the taste of the wearer. As the roads, however, in those days, were infested with robbers, travellers, unless in numbers, or under escort, donned the humblest attire, and were careful to display no article of personal adornment that might be calculated to arouse the cupidity of prowling footpads or mounted highwaymen.

"We are in truth very honest, by the grace of God," answered Peter.

James disappeared from the window, and in a few moments, undid the heavy chains and bars of the door, and threw it open, and as he held his horn lanthorn above his head, so that he could scan the features of the arrivals, he murmured.

"In the name of the Virgin." *

"Amen," answered both the travellers.

"Are you the host, sir?" Robert asked, thinking to elicit some information.

"No. I am the son of the host; but my father at the present moment is ill, and confined to his bed."

"That is not good news," Robert replied. "I pray that he may have speedy recovery. Will you see that our horses are well groomed and fed? We have ridden them hard, for we were anxious to reach this inn before the hour was yet too late."

"You did well, sir. Your horses shall be attended to, for I will see it done myself. What ho, Tony!" he shouted, repeating the summons in a still louder key, before the individual who rejoiced in the name of Tony, made his appearance.

Tony was a fat youth, with a face like a pumpkin, and a head of hair that bore a striking resemblance to a wet mop. Tony had evidently been disturbed from his slumbers over the kitchen fire, for he was rubbing his watery eyes with his red horny knuckles, and was yawning in a manner that exposed the cavernous depths of his huge mouth. And it was a mouth! Tony was noted for it.

"Now then, Blockhead, wake up," James cried impatiently, "and keep your jaws shut, for I don't want

* In lonely houses, especially such as the one described, it was customary for the landlord to say when admitting travellers after dark *in the name of the Virgin*, which signified that in the name of the Virgin Mary, the new comers were entreated to respect the house and its inmates.

you to swallow one of the horses, but to put them both in the stalls."

At this little sally Tony, who was the ostler, laughed coarsely, his laugh very much resembling the braying of a raucous-voiced donkey. Tony carried the evidence of his business about with him, for his massive hob-nailed boots were covered with stable manure; his mop head was filled with morsels of straw; and his whole person reeked of horses.

Tony took the reins of the animals from Peter, and as he led the two tired beasts to the stalls behind the house, the travellers entered.

Notwithstanding his long and hard ride, Robert allowed his supper to pass almost untouched. His mind was filled with many conflicting thoughts, and his intense anxiety to know where Alie was, quite took away his appetite. In order that no suspicion might be aroused, he had told Peter to sup with him, and not give any intimation that he was his master.

Much to Robert's chagrin, the supper was served by a rough, country wench, whose vocabulary seemed to consist of an unintelligible grunt; for if she was ordered to do anything she grunted, and if she was asked a question she grunted; grunting for yes, and grunting for no, and never apparently being able to get beyond the monotonous grunt. Robert was disgusted. He felt that it would be a hopeless task to attempt to get any information from her, and so under the pretence of wishing to see how his horse had fared, he went out to the stables, and there, as he expected, he found Tony. The interesting youth, being overcome by the exertion of grooming the horses, was seated on a bundle of straw, munching a turnip. The horn lanthorn was on the ground, and a wooden dung fork was across his knees.

"Weel master, I've done 'em," he said as Robert entered, and evidently alluding to the horses. He spoke with difficulty too, for his huge mouth was so full

of turnip, that his pumpkin face was as red as a beet-root, and he seemed in danger of asphyxiating. "Eh, but my conscience," he added with a broad grin, as he bolted the masticated turnip, and breathed freely again, "they were in a plight. Why, you must a been a riding of 'em as if the devil were after you." And uttering one of his donkey-laughes, he yanked off another huge morsel of the raw vegetable, and commenced to scrunch it up with his powerful teeth, emitting a sound not at all unlike a horse eating corn.

"Yes, we rode hard," said Robert, as he went into the stall where his mare stood, and patted her neck, and saw that she was well covered with her cloth. "We did not wish to be on the road after dark."

"You were right, master, for there be queer folk about now a-days."

"I suppose so," Robert remarked with assumed carelessness, as he came from the stall. "This seems to be a pretty lonely house," he added, as though he was thinking of nothing in particular,

"Ay, master, that it be."

"Are there many women folk in it, now?" he queried, still in the same careless strain.

"No, master. There be Mag, the kitchen wench, and Noll, the serving wench, and Bridget, the bedchamber wench."

"Is that all?" Robert asked anxiously, as the yokel paused to bite another gap in his turnip.

"No, master. There's young Mistress Duncan."

Robert's heart came up into his mouth, as it were, and the blood rushed to his face.

"Mistress Duncan—eh! Is she here now?"

"Ay, I should think she were," and Tony winked sagaciously with one of his watery eyes.

"Is she ill, too?" Robert asked nervously.

"Noa, not she," and the rustic grinned until the corners of his cavernous mouth seemed to stretch from ear to ear. "But she's looked after, I tell ye. When

there be strangers in the house she baint allowed to show herself."

"And wherefore not?"

"Well, I don't know all the story," said Tony, as he poised the remains of the turnip on the tips of two of his podgy fingers, drew a great sigh, as though he had had turnip enough, then stuck his knife into the portion on his finger, and holding it up, shut one eye and glared at the morsel of vegetable with the other. "You see I've only been in the service of the house these two months gone, but so far as I've heard its owing to some Lord or Squire or such like vermin as wanted to make love to her."

Tony drew his knife out of the turnip, and then jobbed it in again savagely as though he wished it had been the heart of one of the "such like vermin."

Robert went to the door and listened for a moment, but all was quiet. When he returned, Tony had re-seated himself on his truss of straw, and like a gorged boa constrictor seemed disposed to drop off to sleep.

"You are a poor man, Tony," said Robert.

"There never was a poorer," snorted the rustic, as he jerked open his heavy eyelids.

"What's your hiring fee here?"

"Sixty-two and a half merks a year and my keep," mumbled Tony drowsily.

"Now look here, Tony," said Robert. "If you will do me a service I will give you one hundred and twenty-five merks. That's equal to two years' hire."

If the rustic had suddenly sat down on a bed of needles with all the points uppermost he couldn't have sprung to his feet with greater alacrity than he did; and distending his mouth, so as to fully display his green and horse-like teeth, he exclaimed—

"What be the service, master. Why, I would face the devil for that amount of money."

"Hush, don't shout so," said Robert. "The service is to convey a message to your master's daughter."

Tony opened both his watery eyes now, and stared in amazement at the speaker; then he shut one of them, as it seemed with a snap, and putting one of his podgy fingers to the side of his broad, flat nose he said—

"You're a bold 'un you be. What sort of message is it?"

"Will you take it?"

"Yes, or may the devil fly off with me; that is to say"—here he grinned and winked unpleasantly—"that is to say if ye give me the hundred and twenty-five merks first."

"Oh, there will be no difficulty about that," said Robert, "but perhaps you'll inform me how you propose to deliver the message, so that no one else shall be any the wiser."

Again the bumpkin elongated his mouth to the dimensions of a small horse collar as he grinned in a knowing way, and asked *sotto voce*—

"You are her lover. Eh?"

"Yes," said Robert, feeling it was better to answer the fellow's question by a distinct affirmative.

"Oh, I smell a rat," cried Tony, beginning and ending his remark with a whistle. "It's on account of you she's shut up. Eh, master?"

"Yes. I've no doubt it is."

Tony scratched his mop head, rubbed his flat nose, and then asked—

"Do you want her to see you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night."

"Where?"

"Wherever she can manage it."

"What's your name, master?" the rustic asked abruptly and unceremoniously.

Robert was a little taken aback, but, after a moment's hesitation, determined to tell it, for the risk was much the same whether his name was known or not. Besides,

if she did not know who it was who wanted her, she would not come, so he said boldly—

“Robert de Burgh.”

Again Tony’s pumpkin face underwent a variety of changes, as he grinned and whistled, looked surprised and cunning, and at last said—

“Oh, yes, master, I’ve heard of you. There’s been a good deal of talk in this house about one Robert de Burgh.” Robert felt annoyed at the fellow’s familiarity and insolent tone, and instinctively his hand felt for his dagger—“but that doesn’t concern me,” Tony added, and Robert felt relieved again. “Give me those hundred and twenty-five merks,” he went on, “and, if I don’t fetch her to you, may I never get drunk again on a New Year’s day.”

Robert drew out his purse, and, stooping down to the light of the lanthorn, counted out the money, which he handed to him.

“Now, tell me,” he said, “how are you going to give her the message?”

“Come here a minute, master,” was the reply, as the fellow went to the stable door. “You see that window up there with a light in it.” The stables were situated at the back of the house, and he pointed to a small window right under the massive overhanging eave.

“Yes, what of it?”

“That’s her room.”

“Well?”

“Well, in that shed there”—he pointed across the yard—“there’s a ladder, and that ladder’s about long enough to reach up to that window. Now, you bide here till I go into the house to see that the coast is clear. Then up will go that ladder to the window.”

Before Robert could stop him he had crossed the yard and was out of sight in the darkness; and Robert, doubting his honesty and thinking that he meant to betray him, drew his dagger, and stood on guard ready for any emergency.

CHAPTER XIX

ON DANGEROUS GROUND

ROBERT waited so long for the return of Tony that he lost his patience, and, coming to the conclusion that treachery was at work, he determined to go into the house, and face the danger whatever it might be. But just as he crossed the yard, and was about to enter the door of the hostel, Tony and Peter Beg were coming out.

"I've been a long time, master, but I couldn't help it," said Tony apologetically, and in a low tone; "The fac' is I was afraid of arousing the suspicions of James Duncan. He's as moody as an owl, and as deep as a fox, ye ken, and so I thought it best to be cautious."

Robert began to appreciate Tony, and he decided in his own mind that, in spite of his chaw-bacon face and bulbous head, the fellow was not lacking in brains.

"I had got rather anxious about you, sir," Peter put in, and I questioned the ostler here as to where you had gone to, but, as he did not seem inclined to be communicative, I had no notion of letting him out of my sight till I got some information, and, if I hadn't got that information soon, it strikes me there might have been a row in the place."

"You are a faithful fellow, Peter," Robert returned, and feeling that he was well off in possessing such a servant.

"It is my duty to be so, sir," said Peter curtly.

Robert soon made known to Peter the scheme that had been planned, as they all crossed the yard together, and gained the stable.

The night was intensely dark. Even the few stars that had been but dimly visible had hidden themselves, leaving a gloom that was palpable.

"I think we may venture now," he said, and Tony and Peter went to the shed, and, with the least noise possible, brought out the ladder which was hung on hooks against the wall. They then reared it, and found it was fully long enough for their purpose.

All being ready, Tony was about to mount, when Robert said—

"Stay." He drew a handsome signet ring, containing his crest and motto, from his finger, and handed it to the ostler. "Give her this ring as an assurance that she is not being deceived."

Tony took the ring, slipped it on to the first joint of his little finger, for it wouldn't go over the knuckle, then went up the ladder as noiselessly as a cat. On reaching the window he tapped on the glass very gently, not wishing to alarm the inmates.

Robert stood at the stable door in anxiety and expectation. He had an undefined sense that he was making his fate, and that that fate would be an unpleasant one; for a moment thoughts of the cross round his neck, and the gentle creature who had given it to him, flashed through his brain. But he endeavoured to put those thoughts from him, for they worried him, and he rivetted his attention on the top of the ladder.

A long time seemed to pass. To a man whose every faculty is on the watch, and strained in the expectation of danger suddenly arising from unseen quarters, even a few seconds appear long. Robert heard and saw Tony rap on the window panes several times, and at last a face was pressed on the glass. More signs from Tony, and the watcher below saw a figure disappear, but almost instantly reappear, and open the case-

ment. Then there were voices in hurried whispers, and Robert recognised, beyond all doubt, Alie's voice, and, his ears strained to a painful state of tension, caught the words—

“He sent his ring you say, give it me quick,”

There was some movement on the top of the ladder. It was impossible to tell what. Alie then disappeared again, but in about two minutes returned, and slowly and silently opened both halves of the casement. She had enveloped herself in a large cloak with a hood that came up over her head.

With Tony's assistance she got over the window sill, and piloted by him descended the ladder very slowly and carefully.

Robert hurried to the foot, and as she stepped on the last rung, he caught her in his arms, uttering her name with great warmth, and she with a sigh threw her arms round his neck and murmured—

“Robert, my beloved,”

“Keep on the watch Tony,” Robert whispered, and then supporting her, for she seemed overcome, he led her into the stable.

The sudden excitement, and the emotion begotten by the novelty of the situation had so affected her that she nearly fainted, but she speedily recovered, and looking up into his face a look of surprise and alarm overspread her's, and uttering a cry of fear, she started from him. He guessed the cause, and smiling said, as he opened wide his arms.

“Has love no eyes to penetrate this disguise.”

With a cry, not of fear but joy now, she sprang into his outstretched arms, and her heart throbbed against his.

“Ah, Robert,” she murmured gratefully. “Ah, Robert, my beloved, you have come at last. I knew you would, although once or twice my faith wavered. Every night I have dreamed of you, and every day I have thought of you. And now I am in your arms.”

Robert could not quieten his conscience, and her words only quickened its prickings. He was scarcely prepared for this expression of warmth, and it served to show him how fatally he had involved himself.

This step, foolish and headstrong as he knew and felt it to be, was Fate itself, and where would it lead him to? Where would it end? He could not cast his eyes far into the future without seeing that his connection with this woman must either be pitilessly broken at once or it meant ruin for him. The anger of his King, the wrath of his father, the undying reproaches of the gentle Lady Beatrix. All these things stared him in the face. They were like voices—solemn, warning voices—that rang in his ears, and do what he could he could not shut them out. And yet he was under a spell—a spell of madness it might be, but nevertheless a spell—that made him powerless to resist the influences that were dragging him to disaster.

“And tell me, love,” he said, and speaking in a mechanical sort of way, “how have you fared during my absence?”

“Alas! but ill. I have been persecuted. My father and my brothers have shown me no pity, only stern anger. They have kept me a prisoner, and watched me closely.”

“And what of Malcolm Laing?” Robert asked.

“He alone has been generous,” she returned with a touch of enthusiasm. “When he recovered from his wound he visited me, and craved to know what my feelings for him were. I told him, although I knew that I broke *his* heart in the telling, that I had set *my* heart on you. Poor fellow, I did feel for him, but you had pledged your honour to make me your wife, and I knew you would not break that pledge. So I steeled myself against him, and he said he would never trouble me more, but that I should be the wife of Robert de Burgh. He went away, and I have not seen him since. Oh, Robert, hold me closer to you. Do not let me go

from you. For my sake, for your own, let us cling together. My brothers are all banded together, and they have sworn a solemn vow to have a terrible revenge unless you redeem your pledge and make me your wife."

Robert grew more and more uneasy, as those voices still rang in his ears. The anger of his King; the wrath of his father; the undying reproaches of Lady Beatrix. What could he do? How avoid them on the one hand, and the revengeful brothers determined to protect their sister's honour on the other.

In an undertone, and with nervousness displaying itself he asked—

"What shape has their revenge taken so far?"

"Alas! I fear to tell you."

"Nay, do not fear, for I already guess."

"Oh, Robert do not blame me, for I have had no hand in it," she moaned.

"In what?" he asked, almost roughly.

"In what you hint at."

"What think you I hint at?"

"Your sister's abduction."

"Ah, you know of it then, and my surmises are right."

She seemed offended at the manner in which he spoke to her, and holding herself off from him a little said—

"Why are you angry with me? Have I not said I had no hand in it."

"I am not angry with you, my love," he returned, more tenderly.

She came to his breast again, and murmured—

"You are noble and good, and I love you, *love you* so very very much."

He held her more firmly, and kissed her with passion's kiss, and laid her burning cheek to his. He spoke at last. Spoke with despair in his tone.

"Alie, you are blinding me to my duty, to honour, to home. You are dragging me into a gulf from which I can never rise."

She started from him as though he had stung her,

and, by the light of the old lanthorn, he saw that her beautiful face was flushed with anger and pride.

"I am dragging you down into a gulf!" she cried. "What mean you, sir? You sought me in the first instance—not I you. And now that I have suffered so much for your sake, have been reviled, and persecuted, and scorned by my kin, you tell me I am blinding you to duty, to honour, and to home,"

"Oh, Alie," he moaned, pleadingly, "do not be cruel."

"I am not cruel, but you must learn that I, too, have some sense of duty."

"I know it, Alie, I know it," was his distressed exclamation.

"Why then do you seem to think that all the sacrifice is on your side?" she asked.

"Believe me, Alie, you have mistaken my words," he said, as he put his hand to his burning brow.

"There can be no mistaking what is so plain," she answered. "I judge you out of your own mouth. Am I not compromising my own honour and imperilling my very life by being here with you in this place and at this hour? I am but the daughter of a hostel keeper, and my birth is lowly, but I have pride as strong as your own, and that must not be trifled with."

"Alie, Alie, do not scourge me so mercilessly," he exclaimed, advancing towards her, but she repelled him.

"Listen to me, Robert de Burgh," she said, with more anger than she had yet displayed. "You swore by your honour that I should be your wife, and still you say I am blinding you to honour. That shall not be, and here once and for all I release you from your vow and you are free to go, but you must still reckon with my brothers."

Stung by her words, and entranced by her bewitching appearance, he could no longer control himself, and catching her hand, he drew her forward, then flung his arms around her, and rained kisses on her face, and, when his breath came to him, he said—

"That is my answer?"

"You *do* love me, Robert?" she cried in tones of delight.

"Yes—yes—yes," he repeated, and between each utterance of the word was the hyphen of a burning kiss.

"How can I help loving you. Heaven or hell, I know not which has made you, in my eyes, more beautiful than any other woman, and I kneel as a willing slave at the shrine of your beauty."

There was a long silence. They stood locked in each other's arms, with lips pressed to lips.

Presently Robert recovered from his delirium sufficiently to say—

"In this ecstasy I am forgetting my dear sister. Tell me, Alie, where she is?"

"I know not, on my soul. My brothers have concealed her whereabouts from me. They told me that they had stolen her away, and they swore that if you deceived me they would kill her."

A strong feeling of anger came into Robert's heart, but he struggled with it, for he knew that he was powerless. Six determined men were opposed to him, and he himself had swelled their number by setting Malcolm Laing free! and they held in their hand a terrible weapon wherewith to strike him—the threat to murder his sister. Possibly she would welcome that rather than he should sink into disgrace; but how could he accept such a sacrifice. Better, infinitely better, that he should kill himself, and so effectually sever the Gordian knot that bound him.

"I will not deceive you," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said. Then he started, and throwing himself before her as a shield while she clung in terror to him, he drew his dagger, for the warning whistle agreed upon was sounded by Peter. On the night air rose an angry voice; outside on the stones were the sounds of scuffling feet, suddenly the stable door was flung open with tremendous violence, and on the thresh-

hold, looking the very embodiment of dangerous passion, James Duncan appeared with a naked sword in his hand.

CHAPTER XX

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

FOR a moment it seemed as if blood would certainly be shed, James Duncan in fiery rage raised his sword to strike. But with a quick, sudden twist of her body Alie brought herself in front of her lover, and with her right arm round his neck she pointed menacingly and warningly at her brother with her left hand. She was no longer a weak, trembling girl, but a woman strong in resolution and purpose. She panted with excitement; her face was deadly pale; her eyes blazed with a light that was altogether foreign to them.

"Hold," she cried sternly to James, "or strike at your peril. I am your sister, and I, your sister, tell you that I have chosen this man to be my husband."

"Jade," roared James beside himself with passion. "Out of my way and let me strike that dastard and midnight prowler to the earth. An you move not by heaven I will strike you."

"You shall strike him only through my heart," she exclaimed defiantly.

"Have at you both then," was James's response, as he made a furious lunge, but by a dexterous movement Robert jerked himself and Alie out of the line of stroke. At that instant James was seized from behind, and a powerful hand wrenched his sword away. The hand

was Peter Beg's. Peter, faithful to his guard, had given warning when he heard approaching footsteps, and had followed James to the stable door.

The suspicions of James had first been aroused by the absence of the guests, when, as the hour grew late, he went to inquire of them if they wished aught more for the night, and at what time they would set out in the morning.

Unarmed and in the iron grip of Peter, James Duncan was powerless. He did not recognise the man who was with his sister, for Robert's disguise was effective, and now as he struggled to free himself he cried to Alie—

"Who is this midnight prowler, jade, that you dare to outrage the honour of your family, and the sanctity of your home. Speak, or in God's name I swear you shall be cut into pieces."

"Release me, Alie," Robert said as he gently removed her hand. Then drawing himself up he flung his dagger away, and addressing Peter commanded him to free James. That done, he placed himself in front of the irate brother saying—"Behold, I am unarmed, like you. To your face I tell you I am no midnight prowler, and your sister is no jade. My name is Robert de Burgh."

James seemed utterly astounded, but quickly recovering himself, a smile of triumph came into his white face, and he replied with scorn—

"You are a bolder villain than I took you to be, since you thus dare to walk so openly into the lion's den."

At that instant some new actors appeared upon the scene, in the persons of the other brothers, who were variously armed—one in his haste having seized a bar of wood, another a club, a third a pike, and a fourth an axe.

Seeing the reinforcements, James suddenly snatched up his sword, which Peter Beg in his struggle with James, had thrown to the ground, and as he did so he exclaimed—

"Brothers, behold our enemy—Robert de Burgh. Shall we not kill him, and save our honour?"

With a cry of alarm Alie once more placed herself in front of Robert and clung wildly to him, thus unwittingly preventing him from action if he were attacked. But Peter Beg with soldiery quickness interposed himself between his master and the enemy, and looking stern and determined as he drew his long and formidable knife, and stood on guard, said, without any show of excitement, but in a deliberate tone that told plainly enough that not only was he conscious of his own powers, but knew how to use them—

"Beware. This is my master. And the first who advances an inch towards him is a dead man."

Peter's action, his iron look, and his threatening weapon told upon the little group, though as a matter of fact the other brothers had no intention of attacking Robert.

"Stand aside Peter," said Robert authoritatively. "These ruffians know better than to murder me." In obedience to this command Peter moved away, but hastily snatched up his master's dagger which had fallen near the bundle of straw, and handed it to him. Robert took it, but thrust it into its sheath, and with his arms round Alie's waist, he faced his enemies and asked, while Peter stood close by watchful as a beast of prey, "What would you with me?"

James's passion had cooled a little, and constituting himself the spokesman, by right of his years, he answered—

"We demand satisfaction for the wrong you have done us."

"How have I wronged you."

"How? Need you ask that. Is your memory so short that you forget last New Year's Night," said James as he scowled at his foe.

"No. I forget nothing," Robert answered with a lofty air.

"Why, then, ask how you have wronged us. You shed innocent blood, and ought to atone with blood. And now you who have come of noble family, and are in the King's favour, enter our house in disguise, and under cover of the night meet our sister here secretly, in order that you may bring new dishonour upon us."

"I admit that I have, in a moment of hot folly, committed an error, and done you a wrong," Robert returned proudly. "For this dear girl's sake, your sister, whom I honour and respect, and whose honour I will defend with my life, let us resort to some more rational mode of finding a solution of our difficulties, or an it please you that blood should flow, let us defer our quarrel till to-morrow, when we will settle it in fair fight, and not as mere brawlers." This speech had a marked effect upon his hearers, and told as he intended it should. And the effect was further improved by Alie, who, still clinging to Robert, said—

"Brothers, I am of your flesh and blood, and I avow that I love this man. Therefore, if you injure him you injure me."

The face of James was distorted by a dark scowl, and he looked fiercely at his sister. But in a few moments his features relaxed, and he replied—

"You argue well, Robert de Burgh, and your own sister is the weapon that we will use against you. Till to-morrow our quarrel can rest, an you promise that you will make no attempt to leave during the night."

"I am no craven," answered Robert disdainfully.

"Good," said James. "To-morrow, perhaps, we shall stand upon a more equal footing. For the present we offer you the hospitality of our house, and I charge you to respect that hospitality. Alie, return to your room. This is no place for you."

She looked at Robert as if for instructions.

"Do as your brother requests, Alie," he said. He bent down and kissed her, and she returned his embrace.

Then, addressing her brothers, she said in a commanding tone—

“Lay aside your weapons.”

This was complied with, each throwing his weapon on to the straw.

“Robert, conduct me into the house,” she continued.

Robert gave her his arm, and, followed by her brothers and Peter, who was still as watchful as a hawk, and ready for any emergency, they went into the hostel. There Robert once more embraced her, and regretfully and sorrowfully she went to her room.

Robert was glad the affair had ended as it had, for it gave him a short respite at any rate, and he had a few hours before him to think over his future plans.

“If I could only keep Alie quiet for a time,” he thought, “she might ultimately come to regard giving me up as not such a serious thing after all. At any rate, if she marries me, she’ll marry grinding and hateful poverty. If she consents to give me up I will pay her handsomely, and after all she can fall back on her old lover.”

This, perhaps, was not a very honourable way of looking at the matter, seeing how he had already compromised her. But now the most urgent thing that claimed his attention was to release his sister from the hands of her captors; and how to do that was the difficulty he had to solve.

Weary and fagged after the excitement of his night’s adventure he supped heartily, and leaving Peter instructions to be astir in good time in the morning, he betook himself to bed.

While Robert was deliberating with himself, and trying to find a solution for the difficult problem for which he was entirely responsible, other brains besides his own were also busy with the same subject.

James Duncan, as already stated, was a man of a singularly stern and revengeful nature, and he had taken his sister’s conduct so much to heart, to say nothing of

the deadly wrong done to his friend Laing, that had he not been restrained by soberer counsels, he would certainly not have hesitated to kill Robert. His being a suitor for the hand of Laing's sister served no doubt in some measure to intensify his feelings, because he was bound to espouse his future brother-in-law's cause. On the other hand, his brothers were not actuated by any such considerations, nor were they attached so strongly to Malcolm Laing. In point of fact, they took a more mercenary view of the whole affair, and thought it would be rather a grand thing to wed their sister to Robert de Burgh, as she would then become a fine lady, and they would be connected through her with a noble family. Of course they had no idea of letting Robert escape, and it was this that prompted them so readily to lend themselves to the audacious and daring act of abducting Isobel de Burgh. Having got her in their power they felt they were in a position to dictate terms even to so powerful a family as the De Burghs.

Having settled their quarrel for the night they retired to consult as to the course they should pursue on the morrow. Their opponent being under their roof, they were not disposed to let him away until something like a definite understanding had been arrived at.

The result of their deliberations was a common plan of action, and they came to a resolution just as Robert was retiring to his couch, and Peter, having attended to his master's wants, was looking after his own, the chief of them just then being a good supper. This was soon supplied, and over a blazing log fire he fell to with hearty good will on the smoked chine of a wild boar, which he washed down with a brimming jack of ale.

While thus he was engaged in the great kitchen, there entered unto him the man of the pumpkin face and mop head, Tony the ostler.

It should be mentioned that, after the brothers had deliberated on their affairs and come to a decision, James had a good deal of talk with Tony, not suspect-

ing that he of the pumpkin face had been mainly instrumental in bringing Alie and Robert together, or, suspecting, he concealed his suspicions for reasons of his own. Leastways he had much to say to Tony, during which the mop head was scratched often and the flat nose rubbed.

"Well, master," this to Peter, "we got out of that mess pretty well, I'm thinking? Eh?" remarked the man of the stables as he turned his broad back to the blazing logs, and yawned in a manner that was perfectly alarming. And having managed the difficult operation of yawning without dislocating his jaws, or wrenching the top of his head off, he broke out into a guffaw and exclaimed, "Man, but they're no so sharp as they think themselves' to be; anyway other folk can be as sharp as they."

It went without explanation that the "they" who were "no so sharp" were the brothers Duncan.

Peter Beg, not a whit relaxing his usual solidity, nor in any way softened nor impressed with the grins on the pumpkin face, said gruffly, as he held a lump of smoked boar between his mouth and his plate—

"Well, if I were asked to give an opinion, I should say you had distinguished yourself very brilliantly."

Tony here distended the gap which did duty for a mouth, and gave vent to a roar that echoed amongst the blackened beams, and when after much explosion he had reduced himself to a normal condition again, he made answer—

"That's where I showed I was cleverer than they were; do ye no see that, man. They'd have spitted me like a woodcock if they'd caught me then. Now ye ken I've gotten a whole skin, and I'm going to hae mair merks frae yer master to-morn's morn."

"What for?" asked Beg, flashing an ugly look at the rustic.

"Hush," returned Tony, putting his index finger on his bulbous lower lip, and lowering his voice to a mystery

point. "Hush! don't speak so loud," an injunction that seemed quite unnecessary, seeing that whatever loud speaking there had been had come from Tony himself. "Don't you know that *his* sister is a prisoner?"

"Yes. What of that?"

"I will take him to his sister to-morrow, and show him how he can set her free."

There was an expression in Peter's face that indicated he was by no means indifferent to what had been said, but on the contrary, that it had excited him a little. Before answering, however, he dipped his nose into his blackjack, and took a deep draught of the ale. Then as he wiped the foam from his moustache, he said—

"Well, you are not quite such a fool as I took you to be, and if you do what you say I'll answer for it you'll be pretty well paid."

"Eh? You thought I was a fool, master," and Tony grinned again, but his small watery eyes spoke of anger. "Well, I'm generally thought to be a fool, but sometimes folk find out as they've been mistaken."

Peter took no notice of this remark but proceeded to finish his supper, and for some minutes nothing more was said. Tony had seated himself on a settle in the chimney corner, and appeared to be abandoning himself to somnolent influences, but quite suddenly and abruptly he exclaimed—"I say, master, do you like usquebaugh?"

For once Peter Beg's face gave signs of relaxing its usual rigidity, for the question had touched a tender spot. Peter had been a soldier, and had a soldier's love for a taste of something stronger than ale, even when it took the form of "cappie." With wonderful control over himself, however, he never gave way to this taste except when he was granted a holiday, and then he indulged to excess for a day or two. Without any thought or intention of overstepping the bounds of prudence now, he felt that it was an occasion when he might fairly relax and enjoy a small thimbleful of the ardent spirit, more especially as he had made a very

hearty supper, and it only wanted that thimbleful to make it perfect.

"Well," he said slowly, "there are times when I don't object to a measure."

"Man, but ye ken what's good," Tony returned, as he smacked his lips, and broke out into his usual grin. "All the folk in the hoose are awa to their beds," he added, "except us twa. I ken fine where the usquebaugh's kept, and I have it on my mind to tak' a measure with ye before we gang to sleep."

"Don't spoil a good mind," Peter remarked.

"I'll not do that, man," said Tony, as, rising from the settle, he crossed the kitchen, opened the door, held the latch in his hand, and stood in an attitude of listening for some moments; then, going to the wall, he took one of the torches out of its socket, and saying, "There's not so much as a rat stirring. I'll be back to ye in twa or three minutes," disappeared into the passage.

Peter moved himself over to the settle that he might enjoy more of the warmth of the fire, and, as he loosened the belt of his jerkin, he came to the conclusion that Tony *was* a fool, but a very cunning and very knavish one.

In the course of five minutes the mop head appeared in the doorway, and was quickly followed by the squat body, while the pumpkin face was distorted with a grin of intense delight, and as Tony closed the door after him, and crossed the kitchen, he held up a large wooden beaker that was half full of strong spirit.

"I'm no' such a fool as I look, eh?" he remarked, as he held the beaker under Peter's nose, in order that he might get a whiff of the whisky.

"No, you're not so bad," Peter returned, as he sniffed up the aroma.

Tony next took some boiling water from the great iron pot hanging from its chain in the chimney, mixed the water with the contents of the beaker, and, procuring two horns from a shelf, he filled them up with the grog,

sweetening the decoction with honey, and handed one of the horns to his companion. They then clinked the horns together as was the fashion, and drank. Peter took a deep sip, smacked his lips, gave a grunt of satisfaction, and drained the liquor to the last drop; as he put the cup down on to the table, and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, he remarked—

“Man, but that’s good!”

Tony seemed particularly satisfied, and his watery eyes appeared to gleam with a malicious pleasure, while his usual grin suffused itself all over his broad face.

“Have some more,” he said, and he filled up the empty cup. Then in an undertone he trolled forth the following Bacchanalian ditty:—

“To the devil with care, to trouble cry faugh!
For life is worth living with good usquebaugh.
Drink deep, do not spare it, then let the jack pass,
For joy’s to be had with a cup and a lass.
Then cry hey for the lass! sing ho for the cup!
Now drain to the dregs, mind you leave not a sup.
We’ll wink at our troubles, to our cares cry faugh!
For life is worth living with good usquebaugh.”

“Come fill up again, confound him who would funk.
Then raise high your cups, there’s a toast to be drunk;
‘The lass we love best, be she black, brown, or white,’
What matters the hue if her heart is but right.
Now drain to the dregs, turn your cup upside down,
Let laughter and mirth chase away every frown.
To the devil himself we’ll boldly cry faugh!
If we have but a jack of good usquebaugh.”

“Bravo, bravo,” cried Peter, as catching the spirit of the ditty, he drained his cup, and failed to notice that Tony merely put his lips to his, but did not drink:

The spirit was fiery and potent, and soon began to show its power in Peter’s flushed face and brilliant eyes.

“Another dram,” said Tony, as he once more filled Peter’s cup—

“Drink we deep before we sleep,
There is nothing like good liquor;
Care it flies and trouble dies
At sight of a foaming beaker.”

"Ho! by the mass but that's comforting," he cried, as he once more put his cup to his lips but didn't drink, though Peter again drained his, and in a very few minutes gave unmistakable evidence that he was getting drunk.

"Beshrew me," he hiccupped, "but that usquebaugh of yours has got me by the head." He staggered to his feet and reeled, but Tony caught and steadied him.

"Keep your feet, man," said the ostler, "you're no that fu' yet. Come, the doch-an-dorrach."

With trembling hands Peter held forth his cup, which was once more filled and once more drained. Then he spun round and fell on to a settle in a state of insensibility.

"I'm no such a fool as I look, am I master," Tony muttered with a fiendish chuckle as he bent over the fallen man.

Then the door was slowly opened, and James Duncan thrust his head in.

"Is he gone?" he asked.

"Ay, master, he'll neither dance nor haud the can'le," Tony answered with grim irony.

"That's good," said James. "Carry the beast up the stair, but first of all take his weapon from him."

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE HANDS OF THE FOE

TONY having divested the insensible Peter Beg of all his weapons, as well as having eased him of certain monies he had about him, which monies he surreptitiously appropriated to his own use, he lifted him up, and threw him across his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and then carried him to the very top of the house, where there was a cold, dismal, rat-haunted granary. It was a long narrow place right under the roof, which was supported by massive oak beams. The beams were interlaced with spider webs, and the whitewashed walls were thick with dust. The place was lighted by means of two narrow slits in the roof, and the walls and door being very solid, it formed an effectual prison.

On to a heap of straw at one end Tony flung his burden in a very unceremonious way, and spurning the unfortunate Peter with his foot, he said with a churlish snarl.

"I wonder who's the biggest fool now. Eh, master? Why don't you speak? You were a mighty great fire-eater a little while ago, and now when I kick you thus you take no notice. Verily, I'll eat my own shoon, an you are no a bigger fool than Tony after all. Ugh!"

He uttered a grunt of disgust; shrugged his shoulders in contempt, and closing the ponderous oaken door of the granary, shot the bolt, and left poor drunken Peter

a prisoner with as little chance of escape as he would have had from the Tolbooth in Edinburgh.

The reader will gather that in acting as he had done Tony was simply obeying the orders of his masters. A low-minded, deceitful, avaricious and treacherous fellow as he was, the pumpkin-faced ostler had no other thought but for himself, and fearing that he would be suspected of the part he had taken in assisting Alie to join Robert de Burgh, he very readily lent himself to the scheme of the brothers, so that he might not incur their anger. That scheme was comprehensive, and bold as will be seen. The first part of it, that of rendering Peter powerless, had been successfully carried out, the other part was to follow.

When Tony descended the stairs he found James and his brothers assembled in the great kitchen, where Peter had just fallen a victim to his little weakness and a subtle tempter.

"Well, we've drawn that bull dog's fangs any way," James remarked as his factotum entered. "Methinks the other part will be easy."

It was now the dead of night, and save these arch-plotters there was nothing or nobody stirring. Preceded by Tony they made their way to the sleeping chamber of Robert de Burgh. They opened the door easily, for the lock having been purposely tampered with the key failed to shoot the bolt when Robert turned it.

With the cunning and stealth of the fox, Tony crept into the room on his hands and knees, making no more noise than a cat would have done. The log on the hearth had burned down to red ashes, and a subdued red light from these ashes pervaded the room, calling into prominence strange shadows, and accentuating the outlines of the great bed on which De Burgh, all unconscious of the intruders, slept soundly. The ostler continued to creep across the floor very cautiously, pausing now and then to listen if the sleeper gave any

indications of having been disturbed. He reached the small table at the side of the bed, whereon lay Robert's dirk and sword. Tony secured these, and then retreated with them as noiselessly as he had come.

As soon as he was out of the room the five brothers, who were provided with ropes, entered and threw themselves upon De Burgh, who, suddenly aroused from his slumbers, started up and instinctively put his hand out to grasp his weapons. But he was too late. In the doorway stood Tony, holding a torch above his head, and looking like a grinning imp, as whirling shadows, called into being by the flaring torch, played about him.

Robert realised instantly that he had been trapped, and made one great desperate effort to keep himself out of the hands of his captors. But it was all an utter waste of power, for five strong young men seized him, and held him as if he had been gripped in vices. Then nimble and rapid hands passed the cords round his limbs in such a way as to render him perfectly helpless.

"What is the meaning of this dastardly outrage?" he demanded, when he had recovered his breath.

"We are going to take you a journey," said James.

Robert saw how utterly useless it would be in his bound condition to oppose the wishes of these men, who had most effectually rendered him as helpless as a child in its swaddling clothes. Therefore, although he was choking with rage, he determined to go whither they wished him to go; but before moving he said—

"Where is my servant, Peter?"

"In safe keeping," answered Ronald the youngest. "He is so full of usquebaugh that it is doubtful if he will be able to tell his head from his heels for the next twenty-four hours."

Robert did not believe that, but he saw the absurdity of arguing.

"And your sister—what dastardly outrage have you committed on her?"

"We honour and respect our sister more than you

honour and respect yours, perhaps," answered James, meeting scorn with scorn, while an angry frown gathered about his dark face. "If we did not, it is likely enough you would have succeeded in your dastardly plans and have ruined our honour and broken her heart."

"Let us go," returned Robert, not deigning to notice the remark. "I know not what your plans are, nor do I care, but carry them out quickly. That is all I ask."

In attempting to walk he found that his lower limbs were so tightly bound that he could hardly move them, so Ronald stooped and freed the captive's legs entirely, but added an additional cord round his arms and body; an unnecessary proceeding as it seemed, for he was already securely tied.

Headed by Tony with the torch, the little group proceeded to the stalls, where the horses were brought out and saddled, and all being ready, Robert was helped into the saddle on the back of an old grey mare, and placed in the centre of the group. Then they went out into the darkness of the night and travelled for hours.

Presently the darkness commenced to break and give place to the coming dawn. Trees and rocks gradually became visible, until at last the cold, gray light revealed an expanse of rolling country, thickly wooded in parts and broken up into rocky dells in others. The light strengthened, but the morning was cold and raw, and ghostly banners of mist floated about.

Robert began to wonder what the end of this strange nocturnal ride was to be. He looked from one to the other of his guard, and noticed that they were all armed, and he fully expected that they would turn upon him soon and take his life.

For another hour they rode on in silence through a dense forest, and when they emerged from it, they plunged into a dark ravine, along which a stream brawled. They mounted to the crest of some rising ground, and then lying in a hollow Robert noticed a

plain stone house, from the chimney of which smoke was ascending.

This at least was a hopeful sign, he thought, that his life was not to be sacrificed yet.

The house was the home of Malcolm Laing, and the brothers had purposely brought him a very long, roundabout way, in order to deceive him as to the locality.

Descending the hill they soon gained the house. James had ridden on ahead, obviously to give notice to the occupants, and as the others rode up, a tall, red-haired, masculine woman was standing at the door ready to receive them. The woman was Jean Laing, and as she looked upon the bound man she broke into a coarse laugh, and exclaimed—

“Is it possible that the son of the great Sir Hugh de Burgh is so humble that he would consent to ride on such a beast as that?”

Robert made no reply, but, dismounting, was led into the kitchen of the house, that same kitchen where the brothers and Malcolm Laing had taken the oath upon the cross.

Stiff, weary, and downcast, Robert seated himself on a settle to wait for what was to follow. Here he was left alone for some time, during which he made a vain attempt to free his tightly-bound arms, in the hope that if he could have succeeded he might have effected his escape. In about half-an-hour the door opened, and there entered Malcolm Laing.

Robert started as though an apparition had suddenly appeared before him. Of all men he least expected to see this one at that moment.

Malcolm had strangely altered. His wound, his illness, his imprisonment, and his perilous escape had told upon him. His youth seemed to have gone from his face, and a hard, stern, despairing manhood had taken its place. He had all the appearance of one who

had suffered keen disappointment, and whose brightest hopes had been crushed.

Robert sprang to his feet, and involuntarily there escaped from his lips the words—

“You here.”

“Yes! I am here. We meet once again under different circumstances. You gave me liberty, but I don’t thank you for that, for you only gave me what you had no right to take from me. You have wronged and crushed me,” as he spoke he drew a long dirk, and held it as a man who was going to strike a blow. Robert’s cheeks blanched a little, and his breath came hard, but he did not speak. “We are face to face,” Malcolm went on, “and I have drawn my dirk to let you see how easily I could give you a dog’s death. Perhaps you deserve it, but I am no cut-throat, and some day I may meet you under other circumstances—” he restored the dagger to its sheath, and Robert breathed freely again—“I must ever look upon you as my deadly enemy,” he continued, “and I hate you as a man should hate his enemy. But for the sake of her who is more precious to me than my own worthless life, I spare you.”

Robert found tongue now.

“Why, then, have I been brought here?” he asked.

“That you will learn directly.”

“What place is this? Perhaps you will tell me that?”

“Yes. Under this roof my father died, and here I was born. It is my home. Happy once, but you have blighted it. There was no shadow here a few short months ago. Things have changed now, and you have changed them.”

“I have told you before,” Robert exclaimed a little excitedly, “that any reparation I can make I will make.”

“Reparation!” Malcolm repeated with a scornful laugh. “Reparation! Can you undo what you have done? Can you give me back my youth, my health, my spirits, my heart? Can you take your own accursed

shadow from off the path of my life? If you cannot do these things, how in God's name can you make reparation?"

Touched by the man's despairing words and manner, Robert asked not unkindly—

"Is there no way by which I can repair the mischief that has been wrought?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" De Burgh asked anxiously.

"You will make Alie Duncan your lawful wife, and raise her to your own station."

Robert paled again, and the little golden crucifix round his neck seemed weighing him down, while the reproachful eyes of Beatrix Thirlstane appeared in his imagination to be fixed upon him.

"It is impossible," he groaned; scarcely knowing what it was he said.

Instantly the angry, savage look came back to Malcolm, as he echoed—

"Impossible! Why impossible, Robert de Burgh? I told you that if Alie Duncan became not your wife no other woman ever would. Think you those words were lightly spoken? It you think so, dismiss the thought for ever from your mind."

As he spoke he went to the door, and flung it open, and in a few moments Isobel de Burgh entered, followed by Jean, and James and his brothers.

"My sister," Robert gasped, reeling like a man who had been struck, as he beheld Isobel, looking pale and ill, and with scant garments upon her, and those old and ragged, while her limbs were bound with cords as his own were.

"Yes, your unhappy, wretched sister," Isobel answered in low tones, as she hung her head in shame.

"Malcolm Laing," cried Robert, with growing anger, and writhing in his bonds, "who is responsible for this dastardly outrage? what does it all mean?"

"It means," said Malcolm, "that we have the power to compel you to do as we dictate."

"Oh man, man," cried Robert wildly, and appealingly, "have you no pity?" Malcolm made as if about to leave the room, when, with a sort of despairing wail, and feeling for the moment as if his only hope lay in this man, Robert exclaimed—"Malcolm Laing! Come back. Hear me. I wish speech with you."

Malcolm Laing turned suddenly round. His face was flushed and his eyes were aglow with triumph. He laughed bitterly and loud as he said—

"Robert de Burgh, mind you of our meeting in Holyrood, when I was a very holy palmer, and you were a mighty gentleman. When, by your orders, your myrmidons dragged me away, as if I had been a mangy dog, I swore that the time should come when you should seek to parley with me. That time has come sooner than I expected."

Robert felt scorched as it were with unutterable scorn, and the triumph of his enemy, and he cursed his folly now for ever having been instrumental in setting him free from the Tolbooth.

"The triumph is yours," he said almost fiercely. "I freely admit it. But why wreck your spite and spleen on my sweet and gentle sister, who has never injured you?"

Malcolm seemed about to speak when his sister interposed. Drawing her figure up, and curled her lip in contempt and said—

"Why did you, fine sir, wreck your spite and spleen on my sweet and gentle brother, who never injured you?"

Robert felt the full force of the retort, and understood for the first time that this red-haired woman was Malcolm's sister.

"You are a woman," he said, "and should speak woman's language. Women should counsel to forgiveness, not to revenge."

"You are a fool," Jean cried passionately, "if you think that I am one of your milk and water women. I *am* a woman, but I swear by all I hold dear on earth that rather than my brother's wrongs should go unavenged I—I, a woman—I, Jean Laing, would strangle to death with my own hands this doll, your sister."

She looked terrible as she spoke, for her face was lighted up with a fiery wrath, and her whole manner told of her stern, determined character.

"Oh, Robert," Isobel moaned, "this terrible creature has all but killed me as it is, but I crave you make no concessions for my sake. Let us show these people how the De Burghs can die."

Jean wreathed her lips in withering scorn as she looked at Isobel, and said—

"And what if you are a De Burgh? Are you any better than I, who am a Laing? Think you I have no heart, no feeling, no sisterly love for my brother? Pah, I hate you, and if I had had my way I would have killed you before now."

"You creature! you serpent!" Robert cried, beside himself with rage, while his sister shrank from Jean in perfect horror and loathing. "Shame, a double shame on you. You disgrace the very form and features of a woman," he added.

"This woman is my affianced wife," James remarked with anger-flashing eyes.

"You are well matched," Robert said bitterly.

"Let this bandying of words cease," said Malcolm. "We have other business in hand now. You have been brought here for a special purpose, Robert de Burgh, and that purpose shall be fulfilled."

"Before another word is uttered, I demand that you release my sister from those degrading bonds," Robert exclaimed.

"You are hardly in a position to dictate terms," Malcolm answered, "but your sister, nevertheless, shall be released. You shall learn that though we are not

De Burghs we still have hearts and feelings." So saying he crossed to where Isobel stood and undid the cord that was wound round her arms.

Robert was rather touched by this act, and he began to see that in this man whom he had so much despised, was something that almost approached nobleness. His self-denial and resignation to fate and circumstances, were not only laudable but to be admired.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE HAND OF THE ENEMY

"THAT is a gracious act I shall not forget," Robert observed with some show of warmth.

"Thank you," Malcolm returned satirically. "Let me add to your obligation," so saying, he commenced to undo the knots of the rope that bound his wronger, and in a few moments, much to his own amazement, Robert himself stood free. He stretched his cramped limbs and then in spite of those present, he crossed the room and embraced his sister.

"And now," he said, "You will perhaps not object to let me know why I have been brought here?"

Malcolm, who still constituted himself the spokesman, answered—

"That you shall know. It was in the first place to show you that poor and plebeian and despised as we are, we can yet break the pride of a De Burgh. Your sister was stolen from her home in order that we might have a pledge for the fulfilment of your engagement, and never again will she return to that home unless you take her!"

"I take her!"

"Yes. The second reason why you were brought here is to compel you to make a wife of the woman whom you have befooled, and whose heart you have stolen from me."

"Oh, Robert," cried Isobel, unable to control her feelings, "in the name of your honour and your family

do not allow yourself to be forced into a low and hateful union."

"Peace, Isobel," her brother answered, somewhat sternly, and feeling distracted by the many conflicting thoughts that surged through his throbbing brain, as he remembered the King, Holyrood, Lady Beatrix, and his own father.

"What would you have me do?" he asked despairingly of his captors.

"You must make Alie Duncan your wife."

"But surely before such a serious step as that is taken, you will give me some time to think it over," Robert urged.

Malcolm's white face grew red with anger, as he made answer.

"Time to think it over. Last New Year's night and the following morning, did you want time to think over whether you should break my heart and corrupt the woman who was to have been my wife?"

Robert was all a quiver with excitement. He knew that the heavy charge brought against him by this man, who spoke as if he were inspired, was all too true. But still, notwithstanding that, his spirit rebelled against being forced into a marriage by people whom he looked upon as so much beneath him. More especially as he saw that that marriage meant ruin and disgrace to him. In his mental confusion he stammered—

"You *must* give me time. Alie can go away. She shall be well provided with money"——

"Hold," cried Malcolm furiously, as he half drew his dirk, while his companions, catching his anger, stood in threatening attitudes, and, with a cry of distress, Isobel threw herself before her brother. "Do not dare repeat that suggestion," Malcolm continued, "or by heaven I may be tempted to plunge my dirk into your false heart. We scorn your filthy money. Think you that payment could wipe out the disgrace you have inflicted upon us. No, Robert de Burgh, you must learn that even amongst

poor people honour cannot be bought with gold. The wrong you have done must be righted, and you must take Alie to wife."

"Suppose I refuse, what then?" Robert asked, as his pride was stung.

"*Suppose you refuse?*" Malcolm said, with fierce sternness, and emphasising every word, "*then shall your own sister be sacrificed?*"

"Be sacrificed," Robert echoed, as a cold hand seemed to be laid upon his heart.

"Ay, sacrificed," joined in Jean, showing her bitter and uncompromising animosity; "and her naked, dead body shall be flung defiantly against the gate of your father's Castle."

Robert looked around him despairingly. If he had only been possessed of some weapon, he would in all probability have been tempted to have seized his sister, and cut his way through his opponents. But those opponents faced him in strong and determined array. Six armed men, and a powerful, cruel, and embittered woman. What could he do against such a force? And yet for an instant he thought would it not be better to throw himself upon their weapons, and so perish, at least not ignominiously. But he was young, life was sweet, and he had still a hope that even yet he might be able to score a triumph.

Some of his old pride came back to him, although he saw but too clearly how these people had humbled and broken him, and folding his arms he answered—

"You oppose a powerful weapon against me, and leave me no outlet of escape. I must confess that much. When you abducted my sister, you played a very skilful move, and I am defeated. But still I ask you whether you think it quite fair to force me into a marriage without giving me some time to think about it? I have great interests at stake, and all those interests must be sacrificed. What is there to gain by that?"

"The power is ours to-day," answered Malcolm sternly; "to-morrow we may not have it."

"Will nothing tempt you to swerve from the position you have taken up?" Robert asked with a wail of despair.

"Nothing."

Robert turned towards his sister, and in a tone of great agitation asked—

"Isobel, what am I to do?"

She paused and reflected before answering. Then—

"These people are right. If you have wronged their kinswoman you must pay the penalty."

That decided him, and like one who felt that he was sealing his own doom he said, turning to Malcolm—

"Alie Duncan shall be my wife. But it cannot be immediately."

Malcolm took down the iron cross from the wall; the same cross upon which they had all sworn their oath.

"Robert de Burgh," he said solemnly, "on this symbol I swore that you should not wrong Alie Duncan without that wrong was revenged. Take this same cross in your hand, and vow before heaven that you will make Alie Duncan your wife within three months from now."

Robert was a little staggered by this demand, for in those superstitious times an oath taken upon the cross was considered so binding that to break it was a sin beyond the reach of pardon.

"Why do you hesitate, man?" cried Malcolm, "If you are honest in your intentions, those intentions cannot be injured by binding them with an oath. If you take that oath, you and your sister are free to depart; but, if you do not bind yourself, neither of you will cross the threshold more."

Robert saw how useless it was to try and evade his fate, and so in desperation he seized the cross, and, holding it up, he said—

"I solemnly swear by this to make Alie Duncan my wife within three months from to-day." He kissed the

cross and flung it on the table, saying—"There, are you satisfied. If so, let us depart, for I am sick and weary."

"You are free to go," said Malcolm. "*But remember your oath.*"

"How far am I from my father's castle?" Robert asked.

"We will lend you horses and conduct you to within a mile of it," James answered, as he gave some instruction to his brothers.

Robert had no alternative but to accept the escort, and they rode to within a mile of the castle. Then they dismounted and were soon alone.

They walked on slowly and in silence to the castle gate, where they were received with clamorous joy by the guard, and, the news of their arrival spreading like wildfire, Sir Hugh de Burgh speedily appeared, followed by Lady Margery and her ugly poodle, and Nicol, the page, and all the retainers in a great crowd. The Lady Margery, forgetting for the moment her ugly poodle and her rheumatism, fairly danced with delight as she embraced and hugged her niece, who had no words to speak, only tears wherewith to express her emotion.

The cries and shouts of joy and welcome fell somehow harshly on Robert's ears, for he knew that he was all unworthy of them.

To his father he merely remarked—

"I have brought back the lost sheep."

And when his father asked for some particulars and details, he replied that he would tell him more anon, when he had eaten and rested.

Isobel was shocked when she learnt how seriously the Raven had been wounded, for, on the night of her abduction, she did not know what had happened, and she often wondered how it was David had not been able to follow her. As she looked at him, pale and wan now, and then thought of what she had suffered, her blood fired, and she grew angry, and, pressing his hand, she whispered as a crumb of comfort—

"David, some day, perhaps, you shall have your revenge."

That the remark did not fall on barren soil was evidenced by the expression of delight that came into the giant's face, and in an under breath he said—

"I hope so, Mistress Isobel. It was a coward's blow that struck me, and I live to avenge it and you."

As the days passed away, both Isobel and her brother became less inclined to explain the reason of the abduction. She held her peace for her brother's sake, and he because he dare not tell.

On the third day after his arrival home, Robert was agreeably surprised by the appearance of his servant Peter, who had been set at liberty on the day following his debauch, and at once made his way to his master's residence.

Robert's trouble began to weigh upon him so heavily at last that he took his sister into his confidence, and telling her everything—his connection with Alie Duncan, as well as with Lady Beatrix Thirlstane, he craved her advice.

The poor girl was sorely and heavily distressed, but it did not take her long to arrive at a conclusion.

"Unless you wish to pursue a course of dishonour your path is plain," she said, "more especially when your oath is considered. You must make this hostel keeper's daughter your wife."

"And sacrifice all my Court prospects?" he asked in despair.

"Yes, sacrifice everything. You have committed the sin, and must bear the burden of it."

The more Robert dwelt upon his position, the more difficult he found it to reconcile himself to the advice tendered him by his sister. In spite of his oath, in spite of his pledged honour, in spite of everything, he racked his brains for a means to sever his connection with Alie, and at last when driven to the verge of desperation, he told David the Raven the result of their

unlucky visit to the Hostel of the Lion on New Year's night.

David had made rapid progress towards recovery, and though his wound was not thoroughly healed, he was almost himself again.

He listened to his young master's startling story with thrilling nerves, and, learning as he did why Isobel had been abducted and he himself all but killed, his brow grew dark with suppressed anger, and with a muttered oath he said—

“Give me leave, Master Robert, and I will free you from this difficulty.”

These words sank into Robert's brain. He slept upon them and pondered upon them until, as a result, he had several long and secret conversations with the Raven. And the sequel was that about a week afterwards, in the dead of a bright moonlight night, a little body of picked men, all armed to the teeth, and with David at their head, rode forth from the Eagle's Nest on a secret service.

From one of the pigeon windows in the tower Robert watched them go. He saw the moonlight glinting on their arms, and he saw David rise in his stirrups and wave his hand to him, for he knew that he was watching, and then the wretched young man, agitated with many hopes and fears, and with a heart as heavy as lead, crept to his chamber. He had embarked on a desperate venture, and before he knew if he had succeeded he would have to pass many hours of dread suspense. The morrow, however, changed all his plans, for it brought a special messenger from Edinburgh, who was the bearer of a private letter to Robert. The letter was from Lady Beatrix Thirlstane, and as he read the following lines the room seemed to swim around him, and his last hope vanished:—

“My own, well-loved Robert,—This comes laden with sad sorrow to warn you that it is noised abroad, that you aided and abetted the palmer to escape from the Tolbooth.

The matter has come to His Grace's ears, and he has caused inquiries to be made, with the result that an old turnkey in the prison has confessed that he was bribed by your servant to aid the prisoner to escape. The King is furious, and has forbidden me to hold further intercourse with you. But oh! my heart, how can I obey that command? You have deceived me; you have been cruel; you have blighted my life; but I forgive you as a woman must forgive the man she loves. You have taught me how to love; you cannot unteach me the lesson. Therefore out of this very love I bear you I write these to warn you the King sends a herald and an armed guard to summon you to appear at the Palace that you may be stripped of your knighthood as publicly as he conferred it, and dishonoured. Fly, my beloved, and avoid this awful disgrace. In a little while the King's anger may cool, and the affair will blow over. In the meantime I will never lose an opportunity to plead to him in your behalf. Farewell! We may never meet again, but the prayers of her whose heart you have won shall always be for you.

BEATRIX."

As Robert finished reading he bowed his head and wept. The blow had fallen with greater severity than he had thought of. And with a fell swoop all his soul's desires were rendered impossible of accomplishment, and only a blank life and aching void were before him.

He told his sister the dark news. She shared his sorrow and trouble, and her sisterly affection getting the better of her judgment, she endorsed Lady Thirlstane's advice and counselled him to go into hiding for a time, in the hope that circumstances would ultimately set him in the King's favour again. And so he made such preparations as were necessary, and that very night, after a touching and affectionate farewell with Isobel, he and Peter Beg secretly left the Castle on two fleet horses, and set their faces towards England.

On the following day David the Raven returned to

the Eagle's Nest. He had started out with the determination of carrying Alie Duncan off and confining her somewhere, pending his young master's pleasure. But his plan had been frustrated. The hostel was closed. Geillie Duncan was dead, and the brothers and their sister had gone away.

CHAPTER XXIII

"IT IS THY DESTINY. ACCEPT IT WITH RESIGNATION;
SEEK NOT TO KNOW THE MYSTERY"

As might readily be supposed, the daring escape of Malcolm Laing from the Tolbooth, could not long remain a secret to those from whom Robert de Burgh was most desirous it should be kept. Moreover, although the escape was certainly carried out to a successful issue, the arrangements for it were so clumsily made as to plainly reveal the hand that had planned them.

The news of Robert's duplicity fell upon Beatrix with almost crushing effect, and she saw her idol crumble into dust. All the fears that she had had that Robert was concealing something important from her were now painfully confirmed. She saw at once that the reason the supposed palmer had been set at liberty was that it was feared he would make some ugly revelations to her. And as regards Robert's going away, she could come to no other conclusion than that he had gone in order to avoid the consequences of his act, and that the story of his sister's abduction was merely an invention as an excuse for him to leave the palace. For the second time in her young life, poor Lady Beatrix found herself the victim of duplicity and deceit, and no wonder that her faith in man sank lower.

The King was furious, and on her account. He had bestowed a great honour on Robert in knighting him as

he did, and even a still greater honour in allowing him to form a connection with Beatrix Thirlstane.

"Our hospitality has been outraged, and our confidence betrayed," he exclaimed, in a burst of righteous indignation; "but even that counts as nothing when the wrong inflicted upon *you* is considered. We had specially marked this young man out as a recipient of our Royal favour; but, by Saint Paul's bones, he shall be taught now that it is a serious matter to insult his King."

"Ah, sire," murmured Beatrix, as she knelt at his feet, "I would humbly crave your permission to plead for him."

"On what grounds my lady, plead you?" the King demanded with a sternness quite unusual with him when addressing her.

"Alas! I know not," the unhappy girl returned, "save it be your Grace that I *love him*."

The King was touched by her answer, and said softly.

"Rise, madam. We will confer anon on this subject. In the meantime we will have this young man brought back by Royal command, to answer in his person for his crime."

Lady Beatrix could make no answer to this. She knew that she would irritate His Majesty if she attempted to argue with him in his present humour, and so withdrew from his presence.

Then the King turning to the Lion Herald, Sir David Lindsay, who had been present, but had respectfully withdrawn to a distance during the interview, showed how wrathful he was by exclaiming—

"Sir David, we have been sorely befooled by this De Burgh. Let a herald and a guard be sent to summon him to return immediately to give an account of his doings. He shall smart for having deceived us and trifled with the heart of the fair Lady Beatrix."

Poor Lady Beatrix struggled hard between her duty to the King and her love for Robert. It is very highly

probable that had she not possessed that medallion which lay over her heart, duty to the King would have conquered ; but she argued with herself that the portrait was a token of Robert's genuine love, and though he had sinned and had deceived her, she could forgive it all for the sake of the love he bore her. It is true that all her hopes lay withered at her feet, and her golden dreams, which had been of such short duration, had vanished away, but for the sake of the love she resolved to save him from the King's anger. Perhaps she was wrong in this, but she looked only through love's spectacles, and all seemed right. And so, staying not to count the cost, she despatched a trusty messenger with letters to her lover, warning him to fly if he would save himself. It was not long after that messenger departed that she came to feel that she had in all human probability separated herself for ever from her lover. And now, when too late, she saw her indiscretion. The King might suspect her of having warned the fugitive, but even if he did not, his anger would be in no ways lessened against Robert by the latter's flight.

Poor girl! she felt as if her heart was broken, and her life a mere useless blank. To avoid this she had struggled so hard, but the struggle appeared to have been in vain. She was a creature of circumstances, and those circumstances were pitiless, since they rendered it almost impossible that her dearest hopes and yearnings could ever be realised. They made a sport of her ; she knew it, and felt it as a keenly sensitive and highly intellectual woman would. It was so hard for one so young to witness the little sunlight of her life fade away, and deep enfolding shadows creeping up. It was so hard for one so young to be impressed with that awful sense of loneliness ; to hear the dumb voice night and day crying out within her, for kindredship, for sympathy, for understanding. The wealth, the luxury, the pomp, the gaiety that surrounded her, were to her mockeries in her desolation, and gladly would she have

changed them all for a beggar's gown if it would only have brought her happiness. For days she was bowed with the burden of her woe, until rising, chastened, she brought her strong religious faith to her aid, and in that found at least resignation. Henceforth her life might be very peaceful, and she might find even consolation, but while memory lasted her sorrow must always bear her company until the grave separated them, and gave her that peace the world seemed bent upon denying her.

"Oh, Robert, Robert, why hast thou broken my heart?" seemed ever to ring in her brain, until another voice answered her and said—

"It is thy destiny. Accept it with resignation; seek not to know the mystery."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LAST FEAST IN HOLYROOD

THE dark and threatening clouds of war that had for so long been hanging over Scotland, grew denser and more threatening, until men who had their country's welfare at heart, began to tremble at the ominous signs of coming storm that filled the air.

For the time the little domestic affairs of Holyrood were edged into oblivion by the more absorbing and exciting matters that demanded the attention of the King and his counsellors. The quarrel between England and Scotland—though all the quarrel was on the side of Scotland, seemed unmistakably to point to the stern arbitrament of the sword as the only likely settlement of their differences. With an extraordinary perverseness that bordered on fatuity, King James turned a deaf ear to the counsels of his Ministers, and expressed his resolve to make a descent upon England, which he believed at that time to be unprotected and internally weak, for Henry VIII. had gone to France with the very flower of his army to demand payment of his dues.

Already in the Chapel of St. Michael at Linlithgow, James had received a real or pretended supernatural warning, and now that warning took another shape. It was the witching hour of midnight, and, over the Market Cross of Edinburgh, weird, strange, ghostly figures were seen to flit and whirl, like the gossamer film of morning mist borne before the breeze. But

these figures were human in shape, though they came and faded like witch-lights.* And those who witnessed the awful sight were appalled with a deadly fear. Then suddenly out of the darkness, and from over the Cross a voice, stern, solemn, and distinct, was heard uttering a proclamation that took the form of a summons to a long list of nobles and others, citing them to appear at the throne of Divine judgment within forty days. The first name uttered was that of King James himself, and then followed Dukes and Earls, and chiefs of Highland, Lowland, and Border fame, until hundreds had been told off, when the voice ceased, and a strange pale lambent yellow flame played about the summit of the Cross, gradually dying out as the night advanced.

When the news of this remarkable vision was brought to King James, it was earnestly hoped that an event so startling occurring in the very centre of the city, would deter him from pursuing his rash enterprise against England any further, for there were men who affected to believe that in this vision they saw the hand of Divine wrath held menacingly forth, and that the solemn warning that had been uttered, too surely foretold the doom of Scotland's nobility if war was proclaimed.

Those who hoped to impress the Monarch with an account of this supernatural affair were rather startled, not to say disappointed, at the callousness he displayed. It is very probable that he attached no importance to it, but considered it to be some foolish jugglery, specially arranged with a view to giving him a fright. He expressed no such opinion as this, however, though he affected to scorn the apparition.

His Queen also, the unfortunate Margaret, prayed to him to desist from his rash intentions, assuring him with the voice of prophecy that, if he declared war against the neighbouring state, it would be "a waeiful

* *Witch-lights.* The ~~ignis fatuus~~ Will-o'-the-wisp.



day for bonnie Scotland." But even to the entreaties of his consort the King was deaf.

This fiery brand was passed with marvellous speed throughout the kingdom, and then began the note of dread preparation, and the war clouds lowered more and more. Even in the remotest corners of the realm, men furbished up their weapons, and brought forward their rusty armour. Very soon from all quarters there commenced to pour on to the Borough Moor, human streams of armed men; for although a vast number of the King's subjects looked upon the venture as rash and headstrong, no one disobeyed his commands, for he was well beloved from end to end of his kingdom.

Soon the Moor was one huge camp, in which was gathered an army of a hundred thousand fighting men, including earls, dukes, barons, nobles of all ranks, burgesses and commoners. It was long since Scotland had put forth her strength in such a remarkable manner; and as the King viewed the formidable array, he smiled with satisfaction, and dreamed of the day near at hand when he would sit in Westminster and dictate terms of peace to his brother-in-law, the King of England.

Edinburgh was wild with excitement, and the spirits of her people were aroused to enthusiasm by ceaseless strains of martial music. The narrow streets of the town were filled with armed burghers, and everywhere the din of coming strife made itself manifest. On the Moor, borderer and mountaineer encamped together, and for a time sank the differences that had so long existed between them. They were met to make common cause against their common enemy, and so mutually agreed to forget that they themselves had ever been enemies. From morn till night the air was filled with a babel of sounds, but the ringing of the smiths' anvils, and the clank of arms, and jingling of armour, were always predominant. And from night till morn the watch fires threw their red light on the tented field, while the heavy

tramp of mailed men as they kept their lonely vigils was solemn and suggestive.

At length the day approached when King James determined to set his ponderous army in motion, and move south to invade the land of the Sassenach. The night preceding the southward march, Holyrood was a blaze of light, and wassail and mirth reigned supreme. The King feasted his nobles, chiefs and burghers, and everything had been done to make the feast a memorable one. Lords and ladies mingled freely together; gallant and Court beauty jested and flirted as though there was no such thing as war, and they gave no thought to the carnage and bloodshed that were at hand. It is astonishing how little the Scotch knew of England at this time, and how ignorant they were of the power and might of the English Kingdom. But Flodden was to teach them a bitter lesson, and shatter their arrogance, and wreck their pride.

It was long, very long since the grey old Palace had presented such a scene of brilliant festivities. It is highly probable that many there did feel the dark shadow of coming sorrow, though none showed their feelings, each trying to outdo the other in laughter and jest, in order, it might be, to drown the sighing of wailing and weeping, which in imagination they heard.

Whatever might have been the King's thoughts, no living being there could gauge them, for his laughter sounded louder than the rest; his jest was merriest, and his enjoyment seemed unalloyed, though, perhaps, behind this mask of revelry were deep anxiety and pain. Certainly he was on this night—the night of his last feast, and the eve of such stupendous events—the cynosure of that great assembly of lords and ladies. His handsome person had never shown to better advantage. He wore a richly embroidered cap with a plume of eagles' feathers. From his shoulders hung a cloak of the richest crimson velvet, trimmed with most costly fur. His vest was of satin, and his breeches of

the whitest buckskin, while round his neck were the collar and badge of Scotland.*

Not a dance was danced that night that His Grace did not take part in, and he greeted every one with the most gracious courtesy and condescension. It was observed, also, not without misgivings by many, that he was unusually attentive to certain ladies against whom the breath of scandal had already whispered, in spite of their position at Court. But it was well known that James was peculiarly susceptible to woman's charms, and it had been ominously whispered that it was due to the seductive wiles of some artful woman, that the King had resolved to give battle to England.

As the night wore on, the gaiety of the assembly seemed to increase with the wine that was consumed, and the scene was a pageant such as many present had never seen before, and would never see again. From many thousands of lamps a powerful yet soft light was thrown upon the glittering throng, and this, together with the rich dresses—some of them being real cloth of gold, others Genoese velvet, trimmed with pearls—the jewels of all kinds that scintillated with dazzling splendour the beauty of the women, and the grace of the men made up a picture that was impressive in a high degree.

Amidst all those magnificently attired ladies, one looked in vain for the sweet girlish face of the Lady Beatrix Thirlstane. Where was she that she lent not the grace of her presence to this scene of revelry? In a small chamber in a wing of the Palace, far removed from the sounds of the music and the noise of the laughter she sat. On the table a little silver lamp burned low, and threw its rays on to an open Bible and a crucifix, before which Beatrix had been kneeling on a *Priere Dieu*. She was leaning against the open case—ment now, gazing abstractedly out into the starlit

* The idea of this last feast, as well as of the dress of King James is borrowed from Sir Walter Scott's "Marmion."

heavens. Her face was wet with tears, and the girlish look was supplanted by an expression of mental pain and deep sorrow. On the night breeze that rose and fell with the regularity of breath, there floated from the Borough Moor the ringing sounds of the anvils as armour was repaired or shoes for the horses fashioned, together with the whir and whish of the grinding stones, as deadly weapons were sharpened for the coming strife. It was a strange and bitter commentary on the merriment and jest below. It was like the voice of Death speaking from behind a mask of roses.

The unhappy lady heard these sounds, and occasionally shuddered. With a dead love in her heart, and a sense of being utterly lonely in the world, she wished that it had been possible to place herself in the van of those fighting men, and fall a victim to the first flight of arrows that was sped from the foe. But she could not do that. She must live on whether it be for months or years. It mattered not that her sun was set; it mattered not that her heart was broken, her hopes fled, her youth destroyed, and her beauty stamped with the hand of undying sorrow; she must bear it all—silently if possible, but bear it she must.

She strained her mental vision trying to catch a glimpse of the dark future before her. On the morrow her protector and guardian, the King, marched to battle from which he might never return, and if he did not what would her lot be? Her soul revolted against spending the rest of her years in useless idleness. The ring of the anvils and swish of the grindstones seemed to say to her "arouse yourself to activity." Their burden was ever, "This is the prelude to the great drama of slaughter and death, and woman is wanted."

She felt strangely uneasy and restless, and with a great yearning for comfort and sympathy, she turned from the open window and starlit sky, to kneel once more before the cross and Bible. But as she did so, she was suddenly startled by three sharp raps, and then

two slow ones on a door that opened on to a secret stair.

She evidently knew those signals. She covered her eyes with her hand as though in doubt how to act, and shifted her hand to her heart as though some faintness had seized her. But she recovered herself in a few moments, and bowing to the cross and making the sign on her forehead, she crossed the room, lifted the tapestry and drew the bolts of the door. A tall man entered entirely muffled in a cloak. He removed the cloak, and revealed the person of the King. She fell at his feet, and taking his jewelled hand pressed her lips to it. He raised her up. He was agitated now, and his face was strangely sad.

"I could not let the night pass without coming to say farewell, and so I have stolen from the mocking laughter and false gaiety of my friends to snatch a few holy moments with you. In a few hours I set out upon my venture, and heaven knows if I shall ever return." He was moved by some emotion, and paused in his speech.

"Ah, your Grace," said Beatrix with great earnestness, "how my heart swells with gratitude to you for this thoughtfulness, this mark of kindly condescension to one so humble as myself. Would to heaven that I could urge you my Lord the King even now at the eleventh hour, to draw back from this dreadful enterprise. Alas, I am but a weak, silly girl, and my pleadings can have no more effect than the sea on the granite cliffs of our coast."

"Nay, my lady Beatrix, you do me wrong," the King answered, strangely moved. "I know how good, how true, how noble, how deeply fervent you are, and how you speak the sentiments of a soul full of faith in the Divine mercy and goodness. But it is too late, too late. I cannot now withdraw."

"Ah, your Grace, do not say it is too late. For good deeds——"

"Sweet Beatrix," the King interrupted with some show of impatience, "urge me not to attempt the impossible. The die is cast; I must bide by its throw. But I came not here to talk of this, but of yourself. I have watched you grow and develop into a beautiful woman, and I fain would have made you a very happy one. But my hopes have been frustrated, my plans disarranged. The future lies before you. For me there may be no future. And should it be my fate never to come back," he added sadly, "you will be free to withdraw from the Court, as I have made every provision for you. Should you ever become a bride, I pray to God that your husband may prove worthy of so great a treasure."

"I shall never become an earthly bride, my Lord," she murmured with downcast head. "My heart has gone from me. I devote myself henceforth to heaven."

The King was very deeply touched, and suddenly dropping on his knees before the open Bible and crucifix on the table, he covered his eyes with his hands. Lady Beatrix knelt beside him and told her beads, and for some minutes in the dimly lighted room there was perfect silence, a silence that was solemn.

The King rose at last. His face was clouded with an infinite sadness, and there was a ring of pain in his voice as he spoke—

"I must leave you now, my child. This brief quarter of an hour with you has done me good. Farewell, sweet girl. We may never meet again; but to my latest breath I will pray that the saints may guard you."

"Yes, your Grace, we shall meet again, if not on earth in heaven," she murmured with broken sobs.

The King could not speak. His heart seemed to swell up in his mouth and choke his utterance.

He held her head between his hands and kissed her and then strode hastily from the room. And when Beatrix had shot the bolts and arranged the tapestry again, she gave vent to one great heart-broken sob, and

fell upon her knees on the same spot where the King had just knelt.

The fun and gaiety still waxed warm in the great hall below, and the lively strains of the music inspired hundreds of dancing feet. It was known that His Majesty had retired for a little while, and the laughter perhaps was a trifle more boisterous on that account, as a certain etiquette had to be observed in his presence.

Presently the silver trumpets sounded, and the heralds proclaimed "The King, the King." The great folding doors were flung open, and wearing the royal diadem now and a flowing robe of cloth of gold, His Majesty appeared radiant with smiles, and as the Court beauties and courtiers gathered about him, his merry laugh made itself heard above all others. He seemed the gayest of the gay, and as if his heart were as light as a feather, instead of being as heavy as lead.

CHAPTER XXV

FOR SCOTLAND'S HONOUR AND SCOTLAND'S KING

THE revels in the palace ceased as the lights paled before the morning dawn. Then was there many a sorrowful parting; with the day came sober reflection, for not a gallant there but knew that in all probability he had danced his last on earth. Ladies, tired and jaded, crept away to their chambers. The servitors cleared up the remains of the feast, and extinguishing the lights, soon a melancholy silence reigned, where but a little while ago laughter and jest had made the rafters ring.

On the Borough Moor all was excitement and uproar. A deafening din filled the air. The blare of trumpets, the beating of drums, the skirl of bagpipes, the neighing of horses, the ringing of steel, the clang of arms, the rumble of guns, the shouts of the commanders, the cheering of the men. Then the mighty host of fighters and followers commenced to move south, and the solid earth trembled beneath their tramp. It was an August morning, and a brilliant sun flung his broad beams over the moving mass, and flashed from ten thousand points on helmet and breastplate, on shield and lance, on sword and axe. The earth shook with the tramp of the soldiers, and the air palpitated with their cheers, as they answered the thousands and thousands of citizens who had assembled to see them go. A forest of banners and

pennons fluttered in the breeze, their colours being enhanced by the brilliant sunlight.

In all the imposing panoply of war, the King rode at the head of his army, being surrounded by the flower of Scotland's nobility. He was clad in a complete suit of chain armour, his casque being of polished silver. He bestrode a magnificent war horse of coal black hue, whose body was almost entirely covered with steel armour. On each side of the King rode a little body of knights armed cap-a-pie; each man being bound by solemn vow to protect the King with his life.

It was many hours before the last of the phalanxes cleared the moor, and long after that the citizens who had mounted to the heights saw the mighty cloud of dust that rose up into the air as the multitude marched along.

That evening as the sun declined the army halted for the night on the banks of a stream, and the Royal tent was pitched in the centre of the camp and on a knoll.

On the third day the army was still further swelled by Sir Hugh de Burgh, who brought three hundred fighting men to the ranks, amongst them being David the Raven, who had now quite recovered from his wound. These three hundred men were in addition to about forty servants.

Notwithstanding that the King knew of the flight of Robert, for the herald who had been sent to arrest him returned to the Palace before the King left, His Majesty welcomed Sir Hugh very heartily, or rather seemed to do so, for secretly he believed that Sir Hugh had purposely sent his son away in defiance of the Royal command. But it was no time now to quarrel with a chief, who could bring such a following into the field. And so Sir Hugh was received with every mark of Royal favour, and care was taken on both sides to make no allusion to Robert.

Since his son's flight Sir Hugh had been much cast

down, and when the note of war was sounded he took up arms with alacrity, for he felt that he would go mad unless he had some excitement.

Amongst the Chief's personal servants was a page boy, who had come to the Raven and craved to be trained to the use of arms in Sir Hugh's service. But he was such a stripling, and looked so frail and fragile, that the brawny giant laughed, and was immensely amused. Then he demanded of the boy to know where he had come from, and who his people were.

"Alas," the boy answered, "I am a friendless youth; but I crave you seek not to know who I am or whence I come. But, believe me, in the name of our Holy Mother, I am very honest."

David was greatly interested.

"And so thou wouldst be a fighting man, eh?" he cried, as he looked down at the trembling youth, whose head scarcely came up to the giant's breast. "Well, by the mass, thou hast a tall ambition though thy inches be few. Beshrew me but thou art so pretty, boy, that if thou wouldst but don petticoats I would fall in love with thee. Trained in the use of arms, in faith?" roared the Raven at the very comical idea of the thing. "Oh—oh, he—he, but thou art given to jesting, surely, sweet youth, and it is the cap and bells thou shouldst don. Nay, now that I look at thee again, methinks thou shouldst be trained to play the lute and sing love ballads."

"You are very cruel," the boy had said, bursting into tears. "Alas! I have no friends. My father is but newly dead, and my brothers have gone to join the King's army, and, though I am a penniless and friendless orphan, you mock me."

David's great heart swelled at this, and as he patted the curly head of the youth, he exclaimed—

"May the Saints forget me if I mock thee. Come, dry those tears. And as thou hast no father, I'll be a father to thee; but thou canst not bear arms, boy.

That frame of thine was never made for fighting purposes."

The boy was consoled by David's rough kindness, and drying his eyes, said—

"An you think I cannot bear arms. I would crave the lady Isobel to engage me as her page."

The Raven brought his great hand down on to his thigh with a sounding whack as he cried—

"The very thing. From a fighting man to a page is a big stride, fair youth, but by Saint Bridget I swear thou shalt be a page."

The result was that David took the lad to Mistress Isobel, and she was so struck with his appearance, that she at once engaged him into her service.

He was a handsome youth, with curly brown hair, and soft brown languishing eyes. There was no trace of hair upon his face, and his cheeks were of the complexion of a girl's. In fact his whole appearance was strikingly feminine, even to his voice, which lacked that quality of strength peculiar to a man.

In a very few days he had become quite a favourite in the Castle.

When he had been there little more than a week he attracted the notice of Sir Hugh, who, as everyone else had been, was much struck with the boy's beauty, and, when he heard his story, he manifested considerable interest in him, and the lad on his part returned this by displaying a strong attachment for Sir Hugh, and neglecting Isobel. The consequence was that Sir Hugh took the lad himself, but when the sound of war was heard, and the Chief gathered together his clan, he would have left him behind; but the youth vowed that he would go to the war even if his master did not take him; so, rather pleased with his determination, Sir Hugh attached Reuben to the staff of body servants, whose duties were to attend to his personal wants.

To return to the army. Coming to Ford Castle, which was one of the most powerful strongholds in that

part of the country, an attack was made upon it. At first it was feebly defended by Lady Heron, the occupant, and a few retainers. Her husband, William Heron, was at this time a prisoner in Scotland; for, having been engaged in a border fray, he had killed a nobleman, and for this offence had been delivered by Henry VIII. to Scotland.*

King James could not look upon this beautiful woman without being fired with passion for her. It seemed to him that he had never before met such an unique specimen of female loveliness. The romance of the King's nature was also stirred, and it seemed to him perfectly reasonable that he, a Monarch of a great realm, marching at the head of a stupendous army to give battle to a neighbouring kingdom, should fall in love with such a beautiful creature, whose Castle he had burned over her head.

The precious days, during which he ought to have been pushing forward into the enemy's country, were wasted by this fatal dalliance.

His army, which had only brought forty days' supplies with it, was getting to the end of its store, and much dissatisfaction began to make itself rife.

Notwithstanding this, the King could not break the spell which seemed to bind him. The Lady Heron's eyes and witching manner were stronger attractions for him than the chance of sitting in Westminster dictating

* Ford Castle was the great barrier for the east march against Scotland. In a survey of the borders, in 1542, we have the following account of it:—"The castell of Forde standing lykewyse upon the est syde of the said ryver of Tyll, was brunte by the last King of Scots a lytle before he was slayne at Floddon-Felde. Some part thereof hath been reparetted againe sythence that tyme; but the great buyldings, and most necessarye houses resteth ever sythence waste and in decaye;—the which if they were repaired, were able to receyve and lodge ane hundred and mo horsemen, to lye there in garrison in tyme of warre. And, for that purpose, that is a place much convenient, and standeth well for servyce to be done at any place within the said est March; and ys of the inherytaunce of Sir William Heron's heyres."
—*Cotton MSS.*

terms to the King of England. At last information was brought him by his scouts that a great English host was advancing to meet him.

He at once put the remnant of his army in motion, and moved as far as Flodden, where he encamped.

A council of war was at once held, and a plan was drawn up by the nobles, in which it was proposed that the control of the army should be entirely placed under certain noblemen, and that the King himself should remove to a place of safety with a guard of honour. This proposal, however, made James furious, and he vowed to God that he would rather not see Scotland again than acquiesce in any such arrangement. The spirit of the King was at last thoroughly aroused, and from a Sybarite he became a warrior.

Once more all was excitement. The fighting men became enthusiastic, and all were sanguine of success. Once more their swords, spears, and axes were sharpened, and cross-bows and muskets and other deadly weapons were looked to. The drums and trumpets were constantly sounding. Enormous numbers of horses, oxen, baggage waggons, and other impedimenta made up a scene of intense animation, while a fierce warlike spirit permeated every man. Each felt that great events must speedily happen, for the army was already in the enemy's country, and it was hardly likely that the English would allow them to march far without giving them battle. But not a man there supposed that defeat awaited him at the very onset.

All this time the English had not been idle, but were well acquainted with every movement of the Scottish army, from the time of its assembling on the burgh moor to its encamping on Flodden Hill. The emissaries and spies of England had been very busy, and her most daring Border pricklers had even crossed the Tweed and penetrated in disguise to the Scottish capital, where, having learnt all they could, they hied them back with the news to the Earl of Surrey, who was assembling an

enormous army. From the east, west, and south armed men rolled in an unbroken stream, and Durham and Newcastle were swarming with thousands of horse and foot soldiers. From mouth to mouth had passed the news that the Scottish King was advancing to invade England with a stupendous army, and was burning the country and throwing down every Castle in his way. This news aroused the splendid martial spirit of the English, even the women and children sharing in it, in busying themselves in some way or other in attending to the men, making banners and bandages, and helping to bring up provisions. And at last there came to the King of Scotland a challenge from the Earl of Surrey to meet him on the ninth day of September, and to this challenge his Majesty sent the haughty message that even had he been in Edinburgh he would gladly have hastened to accept the challenge.

After this challenge the King determined not to move from the advantageous position he had taken up, from which he commanded a most extensive view of the country to the north and east, as well of that part of Northumberland, from which he expected the enemy would march. On the north of him flowed the river Till, forming a barrier on that quarter as far as the bridge of Twizel, and it did not seem in the least likely that an enemy would approach from that direction.

CHAPTER XXVI

STRIKE HARD AND SURE FOR ALIE'S SAKE

ON the second day after the King had decided to remain in his position, the sound of trumpets was heard, and a body of mounted men were seen approaching from the direction of Berwick. They carried a large banner with them, on which was emblazoned the Royal arms of Scotland. Their leader, who was encased in a complete suit of armour, and had his visor down, rode a white horse without any trappings. On reaching the camp he demanded to be conducted to the Royal tent, as he had a petition to present to his Majesty, and wished to offer him the services of his followers, who numbered two hundred well-armed and well-trained fighting men.

The speaker was led into the King's presence, where, falling on his knees before the King, he removed his helmet and revealed the person of Robert de Burgh. "Humbly and penitently your Grace, I kneel before you to crave your forgiveness," said Robert. "I bring with me two hundred followers whom I have raised on the border to risk their lives in your Grace's cause. Our blood and lives are yours, Oh King, and we beg you accept them. And I, your most humble and faithful servant, crave you to deal with me as seemeth fit to you." The King was much moved by this act of devotion and submission on the part of Robert, and he answered—"Arise, Sir Robert. By this act you have

atoned for your crime, and we forgive you, granting you an indemnity from all consequences of your offence."

Having made his peace with the King, Sir Robert de Burgh, as we must now call him, as the King had confirmed his knighthood, repaired to his father's tent, where he was cordially received, for as the King had pardoned the erring youth, the father could not do less. But as a matter of fact, Sir Hugh was delighted to see his son. He had been deeply grieved at his conduct, and had sorrowed at his absence. The Raven expressed great delight at his young master's return, and that day there was much rejoicing in that part of the camp.

In passing out of his father's tent a little later, Robert observed the page, Reuben Godstone, standing near the entrance. The lad was talking to the Raven, and seemed to be in deep and earnest conversation, but noticing the Raven make a salute to one behind, the lad turned to see to whom the salute was made, and the moment he beheld Robert, he turned pale, and started back, so that David caught him in his arms. Robert on his part was also struck with something in the boy's face, and he fixed his eyes upon him.

"What ails thee, lad," David asked of Reuben.

"Nothing, nothing," the page murmured.

"Who is that pretty youngster you have there?" asked Robert, manifesting considerable curiosity.

"He is a page in thy father's service," answered the Raven. "He wanted to learn the use of arms, but, when I looked in his pretty face and noted his dainty limbs, I said the boudoir or the pantry is the proper place for him, not the rough quarters of a soldier, so I sent him to Mistress Isobel, and she made a page of him."

"But, if he is my sister's page, what does he here?" Robert asked, seemingly much struck, and still looking hard at the page.

"He showed a liking for your father, so Sir Hugh took him, and he has followed his master to the war."

Robert was about to address the page, but, either from shyness or other cause he took to his heels and ran away.

"It is strange," Robert murmured, thoughtfully, "but that youngster's face reminds me wonderfully of one I have seen elsewhere."

It very soon became noised through the camp that Robert de Burgh, the son of the noted border chief, had arrived, and brought two hundred young men on to the field, and that Robert, having previously fallen under the King's displeasure, was now reinstated, and had received the King's written indemnity.

Amongst those who heard this news with great interest was one of the soldiers, a young man whose face was pale and melancholy. As he heard it he grew excited, and into his eyes there came a fierce light. He clenched his fist, and, shaking it in the direction of Robert's tent he said between set teeth—

"Robert de Burgh the hour has come when one of us shall bite the dust."

A little later two men approached Robert's quarters, and blowing a blast upon trumpets they carried, one of them called upon Robert de Burgh, and when he appeared, the man flung a leather gauntlet at Robert's feet, and cried in loud tones—

"Robert de Burgh, Knight, at your feet I fling the glove of Malcolm Laing, who, in the name of chivalry and honour, challenges you to mortal combat. Should you fail to accept that challenge he will brand you as a knave and coward, and lay before the King an account of the wrongs he has suffered at your hands. Robert de Burgh, I, James Duncan, await your answer on behalf of my friend, Malcolm Laing.

Robert could not hear this challenge unmoved, and the blood rushed back upon his heart in a cold flood. He could, on the grounds of Laing's inferior position, and, notwithstanding he had been challenged in the name of honour and chivalry, have declined to take up

the challenge. But there, on the other hand, was the threatened exposure, and he knew too much of Laing to doubt for a moment that he would fail to carry out the threat. Robert's friends had gathered around him and waited breathlessly for his decision; and there was one who had stolen up silently and unperceived, and with white face and a scared look in the eyes, seemed filled with painful anxiety. This one was the page, Reuben Godstone, but amidst the excited throng he stood unnoticed. Robert speedily recovered his self-possession, and decided on the course to take.

He stooped, and picking up the glove said proudly—"I accept the challenge, and will meet Malcolm Laing in mortal combat."

As these words were uttered a suppressed cry of pain caused the onlookers to turn to whence the cry proceeded, and they saw that the little page Reuben had fallen to the ground in a fit or swoon. A tall, powerful man stepped from the crowd and picked him up. The man was David the Raven, and in his great arms he lifted the small light body of the page without any apparent effort, and bore him to his master's tent, where he speedily recovered consciousness.

It need scarcely be said that this challenge caused great sorrow to Robert's father, but he could not say aught against his son accepting it, unless he had wished him to be branded as a coward, and rather than that Sir Hugh would have slain him himself in cold blood.

As the sun was rising on the following morning, flinging his broad beams over the camp and calling into being a world of colour and sheen, a crowd of armed men assembled in a hollow formed by a mound or ridge called Piper's Hill. Sir Hugh de Burgh and his followers were there, and even the page Reuben. The poor boy looked pale and ill, and he kept so close to the Raven that he seemed to be trying to hide himself in the giant's shadow.

Presently a trumpet sounded, and riding at the head

of his troop Robert de Burgh appeared. He was clad in a complete suit of burnished armour, and was armed with a short battle axe with edge and spear point. As Robert appeared, there came from the opposite direction Malcolm Laing, also mounted and clad entirely in armour, although it was of a lighter kind, such as was generally worn by the Borderer's in their forays. He was also armed with a battle axe precisely similar to that borne by Robert. Each horse was also armoured, its head in particular being protected by a plate of steel. Ranged on Laing's side were the five brothers of Alie Duncan, and a large muster of the common soldiers.

As the combatants came upon the field, their followers placed themselves in two rows, leaving a broad lane between them. Into this lane the principals rode, but keeping a wide distance from each other, one at each end of the lane. Then James Duncan strode into the centre of the lane, and in a loud voice cried—

“Malcolm Laing, a free borderer and an honourable man, who has given his services to his Grace King James, having suffered wrong at the hands of Sir Robert de Burgh, knight, hereby challenges the said Robert de Burgh to combat. In the name of chivalry and honour we demand fair play, and may God protect the right.

Having spoken this speech, James fell back into his place again, and then Peter Beg stepped forward and cried—

“Sir Robert de Burgh, knight of noble family, hereby takes up the gage of Malcolm Laing, and consents to give him satisfaction. May God protect the right.”

Peter stepped into his place again. The combatants ranged themselves in position, and the trumpeter sounded the “Make ready.”

Something having gone wrong with Robert's stirrup strap, it was necessary for him to dismount until the strap was adjusted. He bent his head for a moment to see if the belly strap of his saddle was right, and as he did so a voice seemed to whisper in his ear—

"Strike hard and sure for Alie's sake."

He started and turned round in surprise to see who the speaker was. The Raven, Peter Beg, and Reuben were nearest to him, but neither gave any indication that he had spoken the words. Peter was engaged in tightening the strap, and the Raven was holding Robert's helmet, which he had, for convenience sake, removed, while the page, looking very white, was gazing with sad melancholy eyes far away into space.

Robert was greatly moved, and wondered if the words had actually been spoken, or if he had only heard them in imagination. And yet they seemed so real that he was sorely puzzled.

The second bugle now sounded, "be on your guard," so hastily donning his helmet, he mounted his horse again, and posed himself ready for the fight, with those strange words still ringing in his brain, "Strike hard and sure for Alie's sake."

The sun had risen high, and was pouring down a flood of light on to the waving banners and glittering armour, and, as it was shining full in Robert's face, he was at a disadvantage for the moment.

And now, as the bugler raised his bugle once again to sound the "Begin," there was a solemn hush, broken by an audible sigh of pain from Reuben the page. Then, like a sudden roar from the sea, went up a great shout, "Have at him," from the partisans of the combatants. There was the thunder of hoofs upon the green sward, and a clang of steel, as the two men came together. And Robert's helmet, which in his hurry and excitement he had not properly fastened, was sent flying through the air by a blow from the axe of his antagonist. But beyond the jar to the head Robert was not hurt.

Wheeling their horses, and spurring them pitilessly, the fighters went at each other again.

It was obvious from the wild way in which he dealt his blows that Malcolm Laing was furious with rage,

and greatly excited; whereas, on the other hand, Robert was comparatively cool. Those words were still ringing in his ears, and he felt somehow as if every blow he struck *was* struck for Alie's sake.

The axes flashed and glinted in the sun, and swished through the air with a strange and suggestive sound. The maddened and bleeding horses reared and plunged, making it difficult for the riders to keep their saddles, let alone to strike accurately. For nearly five minutes the deadly struggle raged. The onlookers, swayed by the varying movements of the combatants, surged backwards and forwards, and crowded upon each other, shouting themselves hoarse with excitement, as the advantage showed first on the one side, and then on the other.

Reuben, the page, had separated himself from the surging crowd, and had got on to an eminence, so that he was enabled to overlook the scene. He seemed to have caught something of the fever of excitement, but he was pale almost to ghastliness, and his eyes were ablaze with what seemed like an unnatural light.

Up to this moment neither combatant had gained any advantage over the other; the mad restlessness of their steeds, which had been grievously wounded by the random blows from the heavy axes, made it most difficult for the riders to strike effectively. But now the struggling animals suddenly came together, and with marvellous quickness Robert rose in his saddle, and skilfully parrying a lunge of his enemy's weapon, he whirled his own axe round his head and then brought it down with a terrific crash on the helmet of Laing, who, throwing up his arms, fell prone upon the trampled earth smothered in blood. At this victory a great cheer from Robert's side rent the air and drowned the cry of anguish that broke from the lips of Reuben the page, as he ran down from the eminence and lost himself in the struggling crowd.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PAGE AND THE NUN

As soon as Malcolm Laing fell, his horse was seized by those near, and his friends rushed forward to support him and loose his armour. They removed his bent and crushed helmet, and it was then found that he had received a terrible gash in the front part of the head. He was lifted up and borne to the rear of the camp, where some monks and nuns had quartered themselves to render what assistance they could to the sick and wounded.

Skilled in the art of surgery and the use of simple medicines, the monks and nuns were invaluable in these rude times. Malcolm was carried to them in a terrible state, and they soon pronounced his hurt a fatal one, but, nevertheless, all that their skill could do was done for the unfortunate man.

It was several hours before he showed the slightest sign of returning consciousness; and then he wearily opened his eyes, and, glancing round the tent wherein he lay on a rough bed, he murmured—

“Where am I?”

Notwithstanding the coherent question, he was dazed and half stunned yet, and looked ghastly with his ashen blood-stained face, and his head enveloped in bandages. His sunken eyes were vacant, and fixed as if they saw something afar off.

Among the nuns was a young and delicate looking woman, with a face tender and sweet, and sad to a degree that was painful. The forehead and the lower part of the chin were concealed by the grave-like garments she wore, but her soft, liquid eyes, had that wonderful, pensive expression peculiar to sensitive women, who, having failed to realise their hopes in life, devote themselves to alleviating the misery of others, and waiting longingly for the time when they shall be called away to a world where "the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest."

The movements of this nun were so graceful, her skin was so white, and her hands so soft and small, that it was plain she had been born in a station of life far removed above the hewers of wood and drawers of water.

After having given utterance to the "Where am I?" the wounded man relapsed into coma again, though occasionally he emitted a deep groan, the groan being seemingly wrung from him by great pain.

For hours he lay in this state, his bed being clean straw, covered with a strip of canvas. The blood had oozed from his wound, soaking through the many folds of bandages, and trickling in a gory stream on to the pillow that supported his head, until the effect was ghastly.

Presently there stole into the tent, timidly, and with a scared look in his eyes, Reuben Godstone, the page. For some moments he stood contemplating, with a pitying expression, the wounded man, who was lying so still that save for his laborious breathing which caused his chest to rise and fall in an unnatural manner, he might have been taken for one who had already passed to the bourne of eternal silence.

The dying light of the declining sun was flooding the tent, and falling on Reuben it revealed the fact that his eyes were moist.

The nun approached; as she did so the page bowed

low, and in a voice in which emotion declared itself, said—

“How fares it, good sister, with the wounded man?”

“Alas, sweet boy, it fares but ill,” she answered pathetically. “He is grievously hurt, and, I fear, mortally. Know you how he received his hurt?”

“Indeed, yes, sister. He challenged to deadly combat my master’s son.”

“Thy master’s son, dear youth? And who may thy master be?”

“My master is the border chief Sir Hugh de Burgh.”

“Sir Hugh de Burgh,” escaped from the lips of the nun like a faint echo, while her face betrayed amazement and pain.

“Aye, sister. Know you him?”

There was a pause. The sun had sunk behind the hills, and the light had mellowed in the tent, so that things had become indistinct. Presently the nun spoke, but she asked a question, did not answer the one addressed to her.

“Thy master’s son is Robert de Burgh?”

This was asked with a catching of the breath, as though the speaker was agitated and nervous.

“Yes, sister.”

There was another pause. The light decreased, and a soft gloom enfolded all things.

“What is the name of this wounded man?” the nun asked slowly.

“Malcolm Laing.”

“Whence comes he, sweet youth. Know you that?”

“Yes? His home is on the borders of the Ettrick Forest.” Another pause. Then—

“What is thy own name, master page?”

“They call me Reuben Godstone.”

“You seem to have been acquainted with this unhappy man, Reuben?”

Had the dusk permitted her to have seen the face of

the page now, the nun might have been astonished at its anxious pained look.

"I have heard him spoken of," the page answered evasively.

"And why challenged he your master?"

"Some love affair, as I have heard tell."

The nun grew faint, and moved to the door of the tent to breathe the air. Then seating herself on a block of stone that had been placed there, she called the boy to her, and told him to seat himself beside her. The twilight was still lingering on the hills, their outlines standing sharp against the purple sky, but the black impenetrable folds of nocturnal darkness lay over the valley. From the woods came no sounds; the leaves were motionless, the winds had sunk to sleep. In the great arched velvety blue of the sky, stars were beginning to flash with keen brilliance, the watch fires of the camp were making great red splashes of light, bringing into prominence the white tents of the soldiers, and giving a spectral appearance to the armed men grouped about.

Save for these signs it would have been difficult to have realised that a great army lay there, holding in its grasp, so to speak, the destiny of that northern land beyond the Tweed.

This summer eve quietude and solemnity were but the prelude to the death-storm of human passion that was so soon to sweep with desolating fierceness over that peaceful spot.

The impenetrable gloom which filled the valley slowly, and with vapour-like stealth, stole to the summit of the hills, enfolding them in the mantle of night, until their outlines could be no longer traced, save as vague undefined masses of greater darkness than the heavens beyond. The banners and pennons of the camp hung motionless, and only the occasional clank of armour or the neighing of a horse broke the death-like stillness.

The nun laid her soft white hand upon the hand of the page beside her, as though in her solitude she wanted a human touch. But boy and woman sat for a long time. The Spirit of Silence that had descended and lulled Nature into a death-like stillness lulled them also, though it had not lulled their hearts. They were hot and restless, and the nun's dress and the page's coat alike covered its romantic secrets.

At last, in a low tone that was sad, the sister asked—

“Tell me, good youth, what do you know of this man's love affair?”

The page was troubled, and his trouble expressed itself in a deep sigh.

“You are interested in him, sister,” he remarked, though his remark was rather in the form of a question.

“Yes. *I am a woman*,” the nun replied, with such significance that the page failed not to be struck, and bent his wondering eyes on the pensive face that was framed in the dark dress of the Franciscan order, to which the nun belonged. But the boy could see nothing save the expressive eyes, upward turned, as if their owner was reciting a mental prayer.

“The story is a sad one,” the boy replied, and then suddenly ceased, as if the current of words had been arrested by a spasm of emotion.

“All stories that are writ in blood are sad,” the nun said, and then added as if to herself, “and sad, also, when they tell of spent hopes and broken hearts.”

Once again the page was struck by her words, and inclining his head until it leaned upon her bosom, he turned his eyes up into her face as if trying to penetrate to the depths of her thoughts, and as his fingers closed around her hand, he asked in a tremulous whisper—

“Have you ever loved, Sister? Be not angry with me that I ask you this,” he added quickly, as he felt her swelling bosom heave, and noted that she turned away, though she turned not in anger but sorrow, a sorrow that indicated itself in a gush of tears.

She recovered herself, and patting the curly head of the youth said—

"I am not angry. But you are a boy, young yet, and must not ask such questions. Before you lies a long stretch of life in which you will find while in your honest duty happiness and contentment. I have done with the world, save in so far as I may dedicate the few years that remain to me to works of charity. I have joined this holy order that I may be of use during the terrible strife of passionate men."

"Ah, good sister, could you read my heart, boy though you think me, you would see that I, too, have my history," the page returned, nestling closer to her as if for comfort. There was another long pause. Then he continued—"Thus much do I know of Malcolm Laing. He loved a girl, the daughter of a humble hostel-keeper, but Robert de Burgh found her and wooed her."

"How learnt you this?" the nun asked in quick agitation.

"As I have learnt other things. I keep not my eyes nor ears shut."

"But you say he wooed her?" this very sharply.

"Yes."

"Mean you that he wooed her for his wife?"

"He pledged his honour to make her his wife."

"But he was not married to her."

"No."

The nun drew a long breath as if she was relieved of some strain.

"Have you seen this hostel-keeper's daughter?"

"Yes, good sister. Often."

"And what like is she?"

"*A woman*," the boy replied strangely and with emphasis, "even as you are a woman."

"What mean you by that reply?" the nun asked, searching his face with her dark eyes.

"I mean that she is in very truth a woman."

"You speak in riddles, child. Is she fair?"

"Ay. I have heard it said that she is beautiful, so beautiful that scandal's whisper has it that even the King has smiled upon her."

"Scandal is wicked, and should not be believed," the nun returned with some sternness, as though reproaching the lad for even repeating the rumour.

"Ay indeed, good sister, is it," the page replied, "and I am sure in this case absolutely untrue. And yet, if the stories I have heard told by beldames round the ingle fires be not false, Kings have paid their court to less fair women than this one in days gone by."

"You speak with a tongue beyond thy years," the sister said in reproof. "Thy head seems filled with idle gossip."

"Are these beldames' stories *not* true then?" the youth asked with some irony.

"They may be so. In faith I know not. Kings are but men, and men are ever fickle. The fair faces of women captivate them as silly birds are captivated by the serpent's glittering scales."

"But are *all* men so?" the page asked with pointed emphasis.

"As I hope for mercy I do believe that all men are false as lovers," the nun answered a little warmly.

"Even Robert de Burgh?" the page remarked.

"Ay, even Robert de Burgh, who, if what you say is true, is one of the most fickle of men."

"I do not believe you," cried Reuben angrily, and starting from her; and then suddenly, as if ashamed of himself, he dropped on his knee, and, bowing his head on her folded hands, said tearfully—

"Ah, good sister, in charity forgive me for my hastiness. You spoke of my master's son."

"Thou art a true champion of this woman, and of thy master's son," the nun replied sadly.

"Aye, sister, it is my duty. He loved her, and she

returned his love. Should he prove false to her I am sure her heart would break."

"And yet he may prove false to some other woman whose heart is already in twain."

"He may have done. If so I pray God to pity her."

The boy spoke with such a deep earnestness that the nun was strangely moved, and, with a choking sob, she said—

"Leave me now. I fain would tell my beads alone." The lad rose, but, standing before her with bowed head, he said reverently—

"Good sister, I crave you give me a blessing." She slowly raised her hands, and stretched them above him, and in trembling, broken accents murmured—

"May saints watch over and guard thee."

She broke down, and could say no more, but moved away into the darkness.

Reuben stood looking after her for some time, and he heard that she was sobbing. He wondered why she should be so much moved, but he said mentally to himself. "She is a woman, and has loved."

He walked to the door of the tent, and looked in. A lanthorn had been hung from the roof, and it threw a ghastly sickly light on to the man stretched on the blood-stained pallet. All was still and silent, save for a low muttered moan that came occasionally from the lips of the dying man, who was lying on his back, with his eyes open, and fixed on a wooden crucifix suspended on the wall of the tent.

The page strained his eyes to penetrate the gloom at the farther end of the tent, where there was a partition.

But no one was visible. The monks and nuns were engaged in silent devotion. Having assured himself that he was not observed, Reuben crept into the tent, and going down on his knees, he crawled to where Malcolm Laing was lying. He waited for two or three minutes to observe if his presence was known to the sufferer but Laing took no notice. His face wore a

placid look, and his gaze was bent on the crucifix. Reuben moved closer to the dying man, and bringing his lips to Laing's ear, he pronounced his name—"Malcolm Laing, Malcolm Laing,"—twice in almost whispered tones. A look of surprised fear came into the ghastly face, and the poor, bloodshot eyes rolled quickly round to the speaker. It was evident that Laing was in full possession of his senses, but his manhood's strength was all gone. He was a human wreck battered and crushed.

"Who are you who speak my name?" he faltered in weak accents. "Your voice comes to me like one that is strangely familiar."

"Malcolm Laing, you are sorely hurt," the page said in the same low tones, and evading the question, while his own hand in kindly tenderness sought the bloodless hand of the prostrate man.

"Hurt to the death," Laing moaned, closing his trembling eyelids from the effect of some surging emotion.

"Malcolm Laing," Reuben repeated, speaking slowly and solemnly. "If your time has come you must make your peace with God, and forgive your enemies. Ere yet your lips are sealed, say that you forgive him who gave you your death wound—Robert de Burgh."

At the mention of this name the quivering eyelids sprang open, as it were. There was a flash of fire in the sunken orbs, a rush of colour in the ghastly face; and with a mighty effort, as when a desperately wounded animal turns in its death agony to the hunter, so turned Laing to the page crouching beside him. Reuben shrank back a little so as to bring himself into the thick shadow cast by the swinging lanthorn. Malcolm partly raised his head, and as he did so the blood oozed from his soaked bandages. On his features was a look of fierceness, and there was fierceness in his voice, to which excitement lent some strength—

"Forgive Robert de Burgh," he hissed, "forgive the

man who has broken my heart? Forgive the man who has slain me? No! I curse——”

With a rapid movement the page clapped his hand on the trembling lips and smothered the words that would have followed.

“You are dying,” he said, speaking into his ear. “As you hope to be forgiven, you must forgive. Turn your eyes to the image of the Saviour there, and say that as you hope to be forgiven so you forgive Robert de Burgh.”

Reuben removed his hand and waited, hanging, as it were, on the answer that should come.

Malcolm Laing was agitated by some convulsive emotion. His breath escaped from him in that quivering way that tells of internal sobbing. His lips were compressed. The fingers of his hands closed, acted upon by torturing mental distress.

“I—*can't* forgive him,” he moaned.

“Dare *you* say that, you who are sinking into the grave, and who will so soon stand in the awful presence of Him, who will judge us all, not as man judges,” Reuben said, with deep solemnity.

“Why not let me die in peace,” Laing moaned, speaking in a jerky and spasmodic way, as if he were in great pain.

“I would have you die in peace,” answered Reuben, “but that cannot be unless you forgive your enemies.”

Once more the wounded man made an effort to turn himself, so as to look into the face of the speaker, and as he did so he asked in a broken voice—

“Who are you? In the name of the blessed Virgin I command you to tell me.”

Reuben gave a little start, and seemed distressed, but when some moments had passed, he whispered something in the ear of his questioner.

Laing uttered a cry that ended in a great sob, and with a convulsive movement he caught the hand of the page, and held it, and his eyes searched the face that

was bending over him. Then with gasping breath he muttered—

“As—I—hope—to be—forgiven—I freely—forgive—Robert de Burgh.”

“God bless you,” returned the page, and his face lighted up with an expression of infinite joy.

There fell upon the two a solemn and impressive silence.

The page bent very low over the dying man, so low that lips touched lips. A strangely peaceful, placid look spread itself over the ashen face of the wounded man; he turned his filmy eyes to the cross and riveted them there. His fingers tightened round the hand of Reuben. His chest heaved with a great throe; fell, and heaved again. Then it heaved no more. Laing was touched with the eternal silence. The angel of God wrote “peace” on his white face.

Reuben continued to bend over him for a minute or two. He kissed the dead lips with an audible sound. Then he slowly rose. Something like a sob escaped from him, and with the noiselessness of a shadow he stole from the tent, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE SHADOW OF ROYAL WRATH

THE news of the combat between Robert de Burgh and Malcolm Laing, and of the death of Laing, soon spread through the camp, and, as an item of exciting news during a dull time, it was welcomed and freely discussed. Many, of course, were the conjectures as to why Robert de Burgh, a Knight, and favourite of the King, should have consented to fight with Laing, an obscure plebeian, but it was whispered that the cause of quarrel was a love affair, and remarks were made that were far from complimentary to Robert. It was hardly possible that such an affair as this could be kept from the King's ears, even supposing that there had been a set determination that he should not learn it. But the fact is the very opposite was the case, for the favour displayed towards Robert had excited considerable jealousy and ill feeling in the breasts of many nobly born, but very poor young men who idled their time away about the Court. These gentlemen considered that they ought to have taken preference over the son of a rough border chief, and his elevation gave them intense annoyance. The result was that they were delighted to get hold of anything that was likely to displace the favourite, and so they took special means to let the King know what had happened. His Grace received the news with every mark of extreme annoyance, and he instructed his herald to investigate the affair thoroughly, and bring

him a report as speedily as possible. This was done with the result of angering the King still more, and he ordered that Robert should be publicly summoned into his presence, and be called upon before all the knights and nobles to give an explanation of his conduct.

With heavy heart and drooping spirits Robert de Burgh, accompanied by two esquires, took his way to the King's tent. The King sat in state before his tent, wearing his crown and holding his sceptre, and surrounding him were all his nobles and knights, while drawn up on either side were guards and men-at-arms.

As Robert approached and saw these preparations, a sense of absolute despair seized him, for he knew but too well what they foreshadowed; and when he glanced at the King's stern face, he felt that he had little to hope for unless he could satisfactorily clear himself. King James was generous, forgiving, and affable to a fault, except when his authority and wishes were wilfully disregarded, and then he showed that he could be severe almost to tyranny.

As Robert approached this open-air court, and knelt on a square of crimson cloth that had been placed on the grass before the King's seat, a herald stepped forward, and blowing a blast on a silver bugle he said in a loud voice—

"Sir Robert de Burgh, Knight, you are hereby summoned into the presence of His Grace King James of Scotland, to render an account why and wherefore you have taken the life of one of His Grace's soldiers."

The herald ceased and stepped aside again, and then Robert, still kneeling, made answer—

"Most Noble King, the act for which you have summoned me to give an account was forced upon me. Malcolm Laing challenged me to mortal combat, and I slew him in fair fight."

"But wherefore did he challenge you!" demanded the King sternly.

"Your Grace, there was a standing feud between us."

"A standing feud between you! Wherefore so? Was the fault his or thine?"

"Alas! your Grace, I fear it was mine," Robert answered with a sigh of deep despair.

The King frowned and his face grew sterner, as he said—

"Thou art at least honest in this confession; but how injured you this man so deeply that he should challenge thee to a deadly conflict?"

Robert's heart grew cold, he sickened with a sense of shame at being thus called upon to confess his folly before that august assembly. He was so confused and troubled, that he scarcely knew what to answer, but he did manage to stammer out, "Your Grace, I humbly submit that it was after all but a trivial affair."

"A trivial affair," cried the King with fiery anger. "By our Royal blood, but thou triflest with our good sense. A trivial affair, forsooth; and yet this man risked his life upon that trivial affair, and for a matter of no moment thou hast slain him and robbed us of the service of a good soldier. By heaven, Sir Knight, thou dost but add weight to thy fault."

"Ah, your Grace, humbly, and in the dust, I would crave your Grace's pardon, if I have failed to express myself, in proper words," said Robert. "I did but mean that the affair, perhaps, was hardly serious enough to justify the man's challenge."

Before the King could make further remark, there stepped from the ranks of the soldiers behind, a determined, powerful looking man, wearing a coat of light, plate armour, dropping on one knee, he moved his helmet, and in a deep agitated voice said—

"Your Grace, I crave you humble grant me hearing. I am your Grace's loyal and devoted subject, and I am giving my services to your Grace's cause, therefore I claim the right to be heard."

Some of the guard made a move as if to arrest the man, but the King, whose sense of right and justice

was exceedingly strong, motioned them to keep their places.

"Thy name and purpose, sirrah?" the King demanded.

Robert, whose eyes had naturally turned to the intruder, became deadly pale, and inwardly shrank, for he recognised James Duncan.

"My name is James Duncan," the soldier answered, "and my father, now dead, kept the hostel of the Lion. Heaven made his daughter my only sister wondrous fair. She was pledged in marriage to my now dead friend Malcolm Laing, but Robert de Burgh discovered her beauty, caused her to be false to her kin and to her lover. With a coward's blow Robert de Burgh stabbed Malcolm Laing, who, recovering from his wound, sought his wronger, in order that he might learn if he intended to fulfil the pledge he had made upon his honour to marry Alie Duncan."

The King's brow darkened still more, and he looked with flashing eyes at Robert, who still knelt, but kept his head bowed.

"Proceed," said the King authoritatively to Duncan, who had paused.

"Robert de Burgh caused Laing to be arrested," continued Duncan, "and thrown into the Tolbooth; but later he gave him the means to escape, fearing no doubt that he would make unpleasant revelations. Again did Robert de Burgh come to our humble home, and in the dead of night held secret meeting with my sister. Later still he bound himself by oath upon the cross that he would make Alie Duncan his wife, an oath as yet unfulfilled. This is a true tale; your Grace so help me God, and in your Royal presence I impeach Robert de Burgh, and challenge him to deny me!"

"Robert de Burgh what answer hast thou to this serious charge?" exclaimed the King with a display of passion that was rare with him.

"I have no answer, your Grace," Robert faltered.

"By Heaven, sirrah, thou hast been guilty of an offence so black and deep that we must take time to consider what the punishment shall be," thundered the King, feeling unusually enraged, as he remembered poor Lady Beatrix Thirlstane. "Thou hast deceived us," he went on, "trifled with our royal wishes and betrayed our confidence. The penalty for so deep a crime is death. But if we are severe we are also just, as we hope for justice from Heaven. If thou art bound by oath and honour to marry this hostel-keeper's daughter, thou shalt redeem that oath. Where is thy sister, Duncan?" he asked, as he turned to James.

"Alas, your Majesty, I know not. Immediately after the death of her father she disappeared, nor have we been able to trace her; but we deem it probable she went to join Robert de Burgh."

"Is that the case, Sir Robert?" asked his Grace wrathfully.

"No, sire," answered Robert, looking up now, and speaking with some force.

"Know you not where she is?" the King demanded.

"No, sire, I know not, on my soul and honour, no. My eyes have never beheld her since the night this man refers to," Robert returned in deep agitation. He felt now that all his dreams were ended, his hopes entirely dead, and since there was nothing worth living for, he cared not if he died. "All that James Duncan has said," he continued, "is, alas! too true. I have sinned against your Grace, and am willing to pay the penalty. My life is yours, O King, and I yield it to you, and yet in the dust I would humbly crave that you give me your Royal permission to pour out my blood in your Grace's service during the coming battle. Let me meet my death in the face of the foe, and fighting for Scotland's King and glory."

His Majesty seemed touched, it was noticed that the angry expression of his face gave place to one of pain,

and it was quite evident that when he spoke he spoke with an effort, for he was suffering from emotion.

"Thou hast prayed to be allowed to be placed in an honourable position," he said, "and yet thou hast been guilty of the blackest dishonour. When we reinstated thee in our favour some days ago, we were not then informed how gravely thou hadst deceived us. Robert de Burgh we strip thee of thy honour. Thou art no longer knight of ours, but will remain a close prisoner, pending our Royal will. Sergeant-at-arms into thy custody we deliver this man, and we shall hold you responsible for his safe-keeping. At the peril of your life guard him well."

Once more the bugler stepped forward and blew a blast on his trumpet, and in a loud voice cried—"Know all present that Robert de Burgh has by his King's commands been deprived of his knighthood, and is a prisoner subject to the King's disposal."

At the same moment the Sergeant-at-Arms and two of his men approached Robert, who stood like one who was entranced.

"Deliver up your arms, good sir," the Sergeant said.

Like a man who acted in a dream, the unfortunate youth divested himself of his weapons. Then two stalwart guards laid a hand each upon his shoulders, and at the same instant James Duncan, who stood close behind him, hissed with fiery vehemence into his ear—

"*We triumph at last and are revenged, but not enough.*"

Robert heard these words but he gave no outward sign, yet their effect was almost as if drops of molten lead were being poured upon him.

If in that supreme moment of his degradation he could have said to his throbbing heart, *Stop*, and it would have stopped, he would have said it without hesitation, so that he might at least have shown his enemies that he knew how to die whatever might be his faults.

He was conveyed to the "Prisoners' Tent," around which a strong guard was posted, and later in the day

he was conducted under an escort of mounted men to the village of Braxston, and for safer keeping was placed in the little prison of the village, over which a close guard was set.*

It was a terrible undoing of what he had tried to do, a fearful awakening from the repose into which he had lulled himself.

The manner in which he was affected served to prove that he was by no means hardened, for, had he been so, he would have displayed more callousness, and have said to himself—"What does it matter? I am young yet, and may retrieve my fortune, but anyway I will enjoy life." This, however, was not the case; he took the most gloomy view of his position, and felt his disgrace with torturing keenness.

It chanced by some means that his tunic had become unfastened, and, as he now sat on a low stool with his head bowed in his hands, the crucifix given to him by Lady Beatrix swung forward and attracted his attention. With a savage hand he tore it from his neck, and was about to dash it away when, like a flash, his pale face grew more ashen, and he paused in the act, for there rang in his ears the Lady Beatrix's words—

"Robert de Burgh, as you and I hope some day to stand before the throne of mercy, I charge you in the name of your dead mother and my dead mother to guard that cross with your life and never to part from it while you live, until you restore it to me. On your knightly honour swear to do this."

And he *had* sworn to do it. He fairly trembled as he realized how near he had come to breaking this vow, which should be held sacred whatever others were

* Although the author has been unable to discover any historical warrant for saying that Braxston was in the possession of the Scotch at this time, yet it almost seems absurd to suppose that a village which was only a mile and a half from the battlefield should not have been seized by King James. One thing is certain however, a little later some of Surrey's troops were quartered there, so that if the Scotch held it, they must have been driven out.

broken. He sank back in his seat again holding the cross in his hand, and almost involuntarily his eyes turned to the sacred relic, and it conjured up to his mind her other words—

“It shall be as a charm and a blessing to you, bringing you peace when you are troubled, repose when you are weary, contentment when you are discontented, hope when you are tempted to despair.”

“It *shall* be as a charm and a blessing to me,” he murmured tearfully. Then he pressed the cross to his lips, and with reverent hand repaired the broken chain and hung it round his neck again. And as he did so the weight that had crushed him down seemed to be lightened a little, and his despair gave place to a more hopeful feeling.

CHAPTER XXIX

LIKE AN ANGEL IN HUMAN GUISE

ROBERT DE BURGH passed a wretched and miserable night in the village prison of Branxston. He felt crushed as he saw that his hopes were blighted, and his career that promised at first to be so bright was now darkened and ruined. He had incurred the King's wrath in a manner that was not likely to be looked upon with the slightest leniency, for His Majesty was justly incensed at the manner his protege, the Lady Beatrix Thirlstane, had been treated. That was an offence of a very serious character indeed, for though the King was generous and forgiving in many things, he would not brook being trifled with. And after having showered favours on Robert of no ordinary kind, he now found that he had been grossly deceived. That was a crime against the King himself, and the King would know how to punish it.

His killing of Malcolm Laing stood in another light, and might be made a penal offence if the King chose, because Laing was a soldier in His Majesty's pay, and Robert was not justified in accepting his challenge.

Suspense, therefore, added its pangs to the many others that the prisoner now suffered from, for he could not help thinking that he would be dealt severely with, after the impeachment by James Duncan, but what form that severity would take it was difficult for him even to imagine.

Several times during those bitter weary hours his thoughts turned to Lady Beatrix and her humble rival Alie Duncan. The way he had wronged them both caused him to blush with very shame. He wondered what they would think of him when they came to know of his perfidy. He was conscious that both these women loved him truly, but when they came to learn how he was wanting in honesty and chivalry, would they not execrate his very name.

In his despair and wretchedness he resolved to write to each of them, confessing his faults and praying for forgiveness. He would not have much difficulty in despatching a letter to Lady Beatrix in Edinburgh; but, according to James Duncan's account, Alie had gone away, and therefore it might be impossible to communicate with her, but Robert determined to entrust his message to the faithful Raven, who would leave no stone unturned to discover her whereabouts. That, to him, the most awful and dreadful night drifted away, and the morning came full of golden splendour, for the sun rose in regal magnificence, and the sky was aflame with red gold that lighted up even the squalid cell of the little prison.

Robert saw the light. He inhaled the dewy fragrance of the morning; he heard the birds sing, and he knew then what it was to sigh for liberty.

It was about an hour after sunrise that the door of the cell was flung open, and Sir Hugh de Burgh presented himself before his abashed son. The old warrior looked grim and terrible in his anger. He was dressed in armour, and, as he struck the pommel of his sword with his steel encased hand, he exclaimed—

"Wretched and misguided boy, by my father's bones I am strongly tempted to draw my sword and plunge it into your body,"

"Do it, I beseech you," cried his son, as starting up he opened his arms and stood before his enraged father. "Life has no longer any attraction for me, and I do not

fear to die ; therefore, if you have any pity for your own flesh and blood slay me, I crave."

"Traitor and dishonourer," his father answered, in wrath, "My sword, which has done good deeds, would be disgraced were it to be stained with your blood. You have brought dishonour and shame upon me, and the proud name you bear you have dragged into the mire. I could have forgiven you for much, but this humility and lasting disgrace is beyond my forgiveness."

"You are severe, sir, and you use terms far too harsh," said Robert, recovering his self-possession a little.

"Use terms far too harsh," echoed his father, in astonishment ; "you are a bolder knave even than I thought you to be, when you can speak with such unblushing impertinence."

"I resent your accusation," cried Robert, as he flushed with anger. "I am no knave——"

"Cease, boy," roared the irate father. "I came not here to parley with you, but to demand to know what you have done with Alie Duncan. For the honour of my family I must see that that creature does not want."

"I know not where she is."

"I do not believe you."

"Sir, you forget yourself."

"I repeat I do not believe you."

"I give you the lie back to your teeth, then, father though you be of mine," cried Robert, as his face became livid with anger and shame.

"Do not exasperate me," hissed his father, as he shook his gauntlet in his son's face. "Down on your knees, I say, or I will strike you down."

Robert drew himself up very proudly, and he looked at his father with a haughty expression as he made answer—

"I am your son, sir. In my veins runs your blood, and I inherit your pride, therefore I refuse to kneel to any man save my King."

"Your answer would have done you credit if you had not been such a rascal," said Sir Hugh.

"I am no rascal," was the indignant answer.

"How comes it, then, that you have deceived me, that you have deceived your King, and while you played fast and loose with a vulgar hostel-keeper's daughter, you have been paying court to a noble lady? By my heart, but it seems to me that that is rascally conduct, or I know not the meaning of the term."

Robert felt the cutting force of his father's words, and he was abashed.

"I have been very foolish," he said, "and my disgrace is due to my passing fancy for Alie Duncan."

"A passing fancy," cried the elder De Burgh in a tone of disgust. "God's truth, a passing fancy for a serving wench in a hostel. That fancy has led you into crime. You have insulted your King, destroyed your chances of rising to eminence, and besmirched the hitherto unsullied escutcheon of your noble house. His Grace forgives not insult, and I hear that he insists that this mistress of yours shall be your mistress no longer, but your wife."

Robert's face reddened, and his eyes flashed with burning indignation.

"Alie Duncan is no mistress of mine," he cried.

"I believe you not."

"I speak the truth."

"You lie," cried his father, growing more angry, as he firmly believed that his unfortunate son was trying to screen himself.

"It is shameful of you to tell me so," Robert said sharply. "I repeat I speak the truth, and Alie Duncan's whereabouts is unknown to me."

"But her brother accuses you before the King of having ta'en her away."

"Accusation, sir, is not proof."

"But appearances are all against you."

"That I freely admit. But I solemnly aver that

Alie has never been mistress of mine, and I am in utter ignorance of her whereabouts at the present moment."

"But she went away at your instigation?"

"No, she did not."

"You swear that that is true?"

"I swear that it is true," Robert said solemnly. "I feel the disgrace. It burns and tortures me; and I will strangle myself rather than remain here inactive, when my countrymen are engaged in a deadly struggle against the common foe. Father of mine, I plead to you to appeal to the King to give me freedom, that I may atone for my folly by pouring out my blood in his cause. Do this, I beseech you, for the sake of the love you once bore me. I am your son—the lawfully begotten of your body, therefore pity me; for if a father will not pity his child, who else will?"

Sir Hugh de Burgh was evidently touched by the earnest appeal. His tanned and weather-beaten face gave evidence of that, and when he spoke his voice was softened in its accents—

"I am glad to see," he said, "that you have at least the courage of a De Burgh, and I will at once to His Grace. The coming struggle will be a deadly one, every sword will be needed, and on the battlefield you may have an opportunity to retrieve your fallen fortunes. Farewell till we meet again. And I bring not the King's answer to you myself, I will send the Raven with it."

Without another word Sir Hugh turned and strode from the cell without giving his son an opportunity to crave his blessing, as he would have done, and Robert was left once more to his own sorrowful reflections, while hope and fear alternated until he sickened.

Some heavy hours passed, during which the only person he saw was one of his guards, who came to bring him some food. And then another visitor arrived in the person of the nun who had held the conversation

with Reuben the page. Her face was almost entirely concealed by the peculiar head dress of her order. She told her beads and bowed as she entered, and in a voice that was weak and low said—

“I trust, good sir, that I do not intrude, and that my presence may be welcome.”

“In faith, you are very welcome, holy sister,” Robert returned, for he felt that this woman would serve to distract his thoughts for a time.

“I am glad to hear you say so,” the nun replied, seating herself on the common stool which Robert offered her, and which was the only seat in the place. “I have heard of your misfortune,” she continued, “for the story is the current gossip of the camp, and in my holy character I have ventured to visit you, hoping that I might be able to comfort you in your affliction. Spies have brought in word that the English are rapidly approaching, and are now within a few miles of our dear King’s ground, so that before the morrow’s sun rises the field may be sodden with blood, and the slain be counted by thousands.”

Robert wrung his hands and stamped his foot with a gesture of impatience, and he cried despairingly—

“Is there no hope for me, then? With the struggle at hand, am I to lie here in this accursed cell without even the chance of mingling my blood with that of those who fall? Heaven is surely without pity.”

“Hush,” said the nun, with a little shudder, “speak not irreverently; heaven is full of pity for those who seek it.”

“But I cry aloud for freedom, and it hears me not,” Robert exclaimed. “I pray to be allowed to end my wretched life on the swords of my country’s enemies, but my prayer is unanswered.”

“You have erred, and therefore must pay the penalty,” the nun answered with great sweetness. “You have sorely angered our beloved King, and until his anger has cooled you must have patience.”

"Patience!" cried Robert. "Patience when already the struggle may have begun, and the air is filled with the ring of steel and the smoke of battle."

"But you have brought this upon yourself," said the nun.

"Aye, in truth I have," Robert exclaimed, stamping his foot again.

"Take comfort. Heaven is merciful, and even a King's heart may be moved." Then after a pause she asked—

"In what does your great offence consist?"

"Alas! good sister, *I have loved.*"

"And betrayed," she added quickly.

"I will not say that."

"And yet if the gossip be true, you have had two loves, and deceived each."

Robert covered his face with his hand for a few moments, and seemed sorely distressed, then in a voice broken by emotion he answered—

"Sister, my greatest sin possibly has been my youth. I was ambitious, thoughtless, but not heartless."

The nun sighed as she replied—

"The ladies whom you have deceived may take a different view. I have heard that you have vowed eternal love for a lady in the King's Court. Is that not true?"

"I dare not deny it," he muttered with downcast eyes.

"And that you made the same vow in favour of a humble hostel-keeper's daughter?"

"Too true, too true; but wherefore probe me thus?"

"Nay, I do not wish to probe you. My calling is a holy one, my mission comfort, and I would, in this hour of your great sorrow, lead your thoughts to things more enduring than those of earth. But I am anxious to know whether the gossips calumniate you or not, and I would hear from your own lips how far they speak truthfully."

"You are a woman, and a holy one," he said, "and

therefore will know how to pity. I am a very wretched man, with broken hopes, and a blighted life, and turn which way I will, I can see nothing to give me cheer."

"Turn your eyes there," the nun said with great reverence and solemnity, pointing upwards.

"Alas! I do not feel able to do that. I fain would kneel at the feet of the two women I have wronged, and, praying to them for forgiveness yield up my wretched life, upon which a curse seems to have been set."

The golden crucifix which Beatrix had given him was exposed, owing to his tunic being unbuttoned. The nun pointed to it, and said softly—

"From that blessed symbol you should derive hope, comfort, courage, and faith."

"In truth I should, and do," he answered, "for the dear hand that hung it around my neck I may never more clasp."

"It was a woman's hand?"

"Yes, good sister, a very loving woman; so sweet and pious that she adds a lustre to the earth by being upon it. She hung it around my neck, and said it should be a charm and blessing to me."

"And has it been so?" the nun asked in strangely tremulous tones and in apparent agitation.

"It has carried my thoughts to her often," he said evasively.

"And where dwells the lady?"

"She is the one you referred to. She is a favourite with the King, and dwells at Holyrood."

"And her name?"

"Is Beatrix Thirlstane."

"Unhappy lady," sighed the nun.

"Truly unhappy and evil-starred since I cast eyes upon her."

"Do you hope to see her again?"

"Alas, I have no such hope, for if I can but get free from this dungeon I will seek that part of the field

where the battle rages hottest, and end my life in the King's cause."

"It is a noble resolve," the nun replied sorrowfully, "but I pray that a better fate is in store for you, and that you will yet know many years of peace and happiness. But no one can foretell what may come to pass. Our dear King fights in a just cause, and no man must be idle when his King is in danger. I have the honour to be in his gracious favour, I will go to him personally, and plead your cause."

With an exclamation of delight, Robert seized the nun's hand, and pressed it to his lips, as he cried—

"You are surely an angel in human guise, and the King dare not turn a deaf ear to your sweet pleadings. Go to him, holy sister, and leave him not until he gives you a warrant for my release."

"But if he gives that warrant it will be in order that you may wield your sword in his cause."

"Do I ask for aught else?" Robert said.

"The chances are, then, that your life will be sacrificed on the field of battle."

"I pray it may."

"Then, with that prospect before you, have you any message to send to her who gave you that sacred symbol?" She spoke very sorrowfully, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Robert was no less moved, and he answered in broken tones—

"Yes, I pray you, if you will make yourself the bearer of my message, say to her that with my dying lips I prayed to her that she would forgive me. She is all goodness, all sweetness, all gentleness. She is, like yourself, an angel in human guise, and she *will* forgive, I am sure."

"If she is what you say, then will I speak for her now, and say you are forgiven."

"Heaven bless you," Robert cried, "and stay, sweet sister. In your holy character I give you a sacred mission to perform, and I charge you by all you hold

sacred to carry my wishes out." As he spoke he took from his neck the crucifix and the chain that Beatrix Thirlstane had given him, and said—"This cross was a gift to her from her mother, who dying bequeathed it to her with a mother's blessing. She values it as much as she values her life, and when I was coming away she gave it to me in trust. I yield up that trust to you, as I have no hope of ever seeing her again. Guard that cross as you would guard your honour; give it into her own hands and tell her to pray for me."

The nun took the cross with trembling hand, and Robert noticed that her pensive eyes were suffused with tears. Her face was so concealed that he could see little more than the upper part of it; but that little revealed that she was suffering from keen emotion, and when after a pause she spoke, her voice was all aquiver with agitation.

"Tell me, good sir," she said, as she fixed her eyes on the little crucifix, "loved you the lady who gave you this very truly?"

"Methought I loved her," he answered.

"You thought!" and the nun turned her eyes upon him. "You only *thought*, you say. Did she love you?"

"Ay, by heaven, she did."

"And yet you returned not that love?"

"Alas, that is too true."

"Unhappy woman, unhappy woman," sighed the nun, as she kissed the golden crucifix which she held in her hand. "And did she know how false you were?"

"No, sister."

"She trusted you?"

"She did."

"And notwithstanding her great trust and her whole faith that she placed in you, you could trifle with her most sacred feelings?"

Abashed and burning with a sense of shame, Robert dropped upon his knee before the nun, who stretching forth her hand placed it upon his bowed head.

"Unhappily what you say is too true," Robert murmured. "I did trifle with her! but at that time I did not realise how great was my wickedness. Her presence was very grateful to me, and her sweet voice was music in my ears, while her eyes—so like your own—held me under a spell. Had fate given her to me to wife I would have respected and honoured her."

"But not have loved her?"

"Yes, I might even have loved her then."

"But you say you had another image in your heart. Was that image the hostel-keeper's daughter?"

"It was."

"And was she more beautiful than the unhappy Beatrix Thirlstane?"

"Hardly so. She lacked the grace of Beatrix, but she was very winsome."

"How came it, then, that one so humble could take you captive, when the lady of rank and power, and who could have given you position and wealth, was unable to do more than win your flattery?"

"I scarcely know. The mysterious workings of the heart admit of no interpretation at times."

"What was the name of your humble syren?"

"Alie Duncan."

"She knew of your love?"

"She did."

"And returned it?"

"Yes."

"Did she know that you professed love for the Court beauty?"

"No, sweet sister."

"So that you really deceived them both?"

"I dare not deny it."

"Poor creatures. What had these women done that they should have become the victims of such perfidy?"

"The sin was mine, and on me has fallen the penalty."

"But think you they do not suffer?" cried the nun, speaking with some warmth. "Do you suppose a woman's

heart is of such pliable material that it receives no lasting impression, and that man's perfidy cannot break it? As the story runs in camp, this hostel-keeper's daughter had another lover whom you ruined, and when two days ago he challenged you to mortal combat, you slew him."

"You make me cringe with very shame," Robert answered; "and I feel that all you say is true; and, I pray you, take my earnest words of true repentance. I have wronged both, and my heart bleeds as I think of it. But I trust Beatrix will try to forgive me; and, when I am lying dead perhaps, she will shed a tear for one whose folly killed him."

The nun was greatly touched, and it was some moments before she could compose herself sufficiently to speak. Then, in a voice weak with emotion, she made answer—

"Your message shall be faithfully conveyed. And now I must say farewell."

Robert knelt at the feet of the nun, and she placed one of her soft hands upon his head, and raising the other upwards, said—

"May Heaven's rich blessing be ever upon you, and may its all-loving mercy shield you in this hour of deadly peril."

He rose, and, seizing her hand, kissed it. Then she leaned slightly forward, and touched him on the forehead with her lips, and muttering in broken accents the word *farewell*, she left him standing there, almost choked by his rising emotion.

CHAPTER XXX

THE COMING OF THE FOE

THE visit of the nun to Robert had the effect of considerably soothing him.

"I wonder who she is?" he thought. "She is evidently of gentle breeding. Her manner and tone revealed that. The Church is a sanctuary to women who have been pursued by sorrow, and I should say that she must have suffered keenly.

Musing thus he paced up and down within the narrow limits of his cell, and, when one of the guard brought him some food, he started expectantly, thinking it was the order of his release; and, when he saw it was only his supper, he exclaimed in a disgusted tone—

"Hast heard nothing about my being set free, man?"

"No, sir," the man answered, with a respectful bow.

"Is there no word from the King as to my disposal?"

"I have heard of none, sir."

"God's truth," cried Robert, with great irritability, "Am I to be kept here like a rat in a hole. Surely there has been time enough for His Grace to have made up his mind to some course."

"Reports say that the English are close at hand, and that the King is much occupied in disposing his forces for the coming battle, which cannot now be long delayed."

"And so I am to be forgotten and left to rot in this dungeon, while my countrymen are falling before the

foe." He stamped his foot and tore his hair in his passion and impatience. "How goes the hour now?" he cried.

"It is five and a half of the clock," answered the man.

"Five and a half of the clock," Robert repeated. "It is certain then that I am not to be set free to-night." He paused, then turning suddenly to the man, asked—"Art thou poor?"

"I have nought but my soldier's pay, sir."

"Dost thou love money?"

"Aye, sir, as most men do."

"And thou wouldst like to be rich?"

"That would I, sir."

"Set me free from this cursed hole then, and I will make thee as rich as a Jew."

The man drew himself up proudly, as he made reply—

"I am a Soldier, sir, true to my duty and my trust, and poor as I am, money will not tempt me from my allegiance." Then he made a military salute and withdrew, shooting the heavy bolt with a sharp clang as if he were very indignant.

Robert was abashed and rebuked. He felt that this humble soldier had in those few words preached him an eloquent sermon.

It was a terrible position for a young man full of life and energy to be in, and Robert, with a cry of rage, threw himself to the ground and groaned with mental anguish.

It was a bitter penalty he was paying for his errors; and so keenly did he feel his position that several times he was sorely tempted to dash his brains out against the stone wall. But in these moments there came before him the person of the nun, and she seemed to be speaking to him again in her musical tones, and bidding him be of good hope. Tired and physically exhausted, he sank into an uneasy slumber, and when he awoke he saw the stars shining through the square hole that did duty for a window.

He rose from his hard couch of stone, for he was stiff and weary. He stretched his aching limbs, and moistened his parched mouth with some water from the earthenware jug that the guard had brought him. Then he sat down on the stool and covered his face with his hands, as he thought over the stirring events of the last few months of his life.

In a little while he started and listened, for sounds borne by the night breeze had come to his ears. The sounds were the beating of a drum. Then he sprang to his feet and clambered up to the window. The silent stars were keeping their lonely vigils, a gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the trees. All was still again; but, as with suppressed excitement he stood in an attitude of expectancy, he once more heard the beat of a drum.

"What does that mean?" he murmured. "Has the battle already begun?"

Then in an outburst of passion and impatience, he gave a mighty tug and wrench at the bars, but in their solid strength they laughed at his puny efforts.

"Oh, heaven, why am I forsaken?" he cried in his agony, but only the night wind answered his cry; and clinging to the bars, he bowed his head and sobbed.

Once again he started and listened, for now he caught the measured tramp of heavy feet, and in a little while the tramp was mingled with the clank of steel, and the rattle of armour. There was no mistaking what it meant now. Soldiers were approaching. But what soldiers were they? Were they friends or foes?

The unhappy young man listened with palpitating heart to that measured tramp as it came nearer and nearer, and seemed to make the solid earth fairly tremble; and he peered into the darkness, but could see nothing, save the dark masses of the trees and the solemn stars above.

Nearer and nearer approached those tramping feet. There was no mistaking the military tread, and it was

equally certain that a large body of troops was approaching.

The tramp grew louder now, and it was mingled with the tread of horses. Then suddenly the quiet of the little village was disturbed by the sound of the alarm bugle. The Scottish soldiers had heard the tramp at last. There was but a handful of them, not more than two dozen at the outside, including the prison guard. There was now much hurrying to and fro; there was the rattling of armour and the clashing of arms, as the men hastily accoutred themselves. Then for a few minutes there was silence. The on-coming troops had evidently stopped, and those in the village were motionless. Presently the echoes were awakened by a shot, and that seemed to be the signal for the tramp to be renewed with increased vigour.

Robert could no longer doubt what it meant. The English were approaching, and soon they and his countrymen would be engaged in deadly strife. He sprang down, and, seizing the stool, he battered at his prison door, and called loudly to be released, but the walls echoed back his cries, for there was no one to hear him. His keepers had been called off to do duty with the rest of the soldiers in attempting to repel the enemy, for not a single man could be spared. Then in horrible despair he threw himself on the ground.

It was awful to be caged up there, helpless and hopeless, while the foe was swarming round. Next he heard, as in a nightmare dream, the rush of feet, the clash of arms, the cries of hoarse-voiced men. Steel met steel, and there was a roar like the thundering surf on a shingly beach, and gradually these sounds faded away, and Robert sank into a sort of coma, induced by the long mental strain he had endured, and the agonising excitement he had gone through.

When he recovered from his sleep or swoon the sun was streaming into his cell, and making even that gloomy place bright with golden light. The birds were

singing blithely, and now and again there came to him the distant sounds of clanking steel.

He sat up. His head throbbed with a racking pain, and he felt bewildered. He recalled the events of the night, but somehow it seemed to him as if he had been the victim of a dream. But when he had recovered his scattered senses he could no longer doubt that the village had been taken possession of by English soldiers, and the little garrison slain.

"What now will be my lot?" he thought, and in his dire distress he called upon heaven to let him die. After this he must have slept or swooned again, for there was another blank; but, when he awoke he was refreshed and felt better. He was enabled to reflect more calmly upon his position, but those reflections only served to show him that if Braxston was in the hands of the enemy there was no hope for him, for, even if the King had intended to release him, the opportunity for doing so had passed.

He tried very hard to resign himself to his fate whatever that fate might be, but, after all, it was only trying without success; for, if he were not doomed to an inglorious death, imprisonment in England would probably be his lot, and that was a prospect he shuddered at. It was unutterably horrible to be shut up there in ignorance of what was passing around.

Presently he heard the sounds of martial music. There were the beating of drums and the toot of fife, mingled with the commands of officers, and the heavy tramping about of men; and always that ominous clank of steel. And these sounds again were mingled with others, the whirr and whish of grindstone, as battle axes were sharpened and spear heads pointed. All these things told too surely of the dreadful business of war.

The tired English soldiers had taken a brief rest after their march on Braxston, and now all were astir again. and bustle and activity prevailed.

At length a silence seemed to fall upon the village once more; and there were indications that the soldiers had marched away somewhere.

"I am forgotten," Robert groaned. "A curse is upon me. Why did I part with that crucifix to the nun? Beatrix Thirlstane told me that while I kept it, it would be a blessing and a comfort to me, and yet I have given it into the hands of a stranger. Oh, fool, fool that I am, and have been."

Suddenly he started up, for the sounds of a key grating in the lock fell upon his ears. It was evident that some one was trying to open the door, but it was some one who was not used to it, for there was a good deal of fumbling and twisting about before the bolt was shot back. Then holding his breath in keen suspense, Robert stood facing the door, that slowly swung back on its ponderous hinges until it revealed the person of Reuben the page boy.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE KING IS CHECKED

O'ER Flodden Field the sun rose in unclouded splendour on that fatal day the 9th of September 1513 when Scotland's power was to be broken and the flower of her nobility utterly crushed. As the night mists rolled away it revealed King James's mighty host in all the pomp and panoply of war. From the King's tent the royal banner fluttered in the morning breeze, and from all quarters came the sounds of bugles and the beat of drums as the soldiers from one end of the camp to the other were aroused by the reveille, and warned that the stern struggle for supremacy was at hand.*

* The eminence called Flodden lies near the river Till. It is the last and lowest of those hills, that extend on the north-east of the great mountain of Cheviot towards the low ground on the side of the Tweed, from which river Flodden is distant about four miles. The ascent to the top of it, from the side of the river Till, where it takes a northerly direction, just by the foot of the declivity on which the Castle and village of Ford stand, is about half a mile ; and over the Till at that place there is a bridge. On the south of Flodden lies the extensive and very level plain of Millfield, having on its west side high hills, the branches of the Cheviots ; on the north Flodden, and other moderate eminences adjoining to it ; and on the south and east a tract of rising ground, nigh the foot of which is the slow and winding course of the Till. The nearest approach for the English Army to Flodden was through this plain, in every part whereof they would have been in full view of the Scots, who had a great advantage in being posted on an eminence which on the side, towards the English, had a long declivity, with hollow and marshy grounds at its foot." Hutchinson's Northumberland 1776.

Soon all was excitement, bustle, and activity. Arrows and spears, bills and axes were sharpened, and the smiths and armourers were busy rivetting armour and grinding swords. Messengers passed rapidly backwards and forwards, and the leaders held hasty conferences together, and decided the plan of the battle.

The King was astir very early. He had passed a restless night, for, in spite of his firm belief that his army was invincible, he knew that the coming day would be a momentous one, and that it could not fail to be marked by great events, and that before night had again come, death would have set the seal of eternal silence on thousands of those who were now lusty and hearty in the full vigour of their manhood's strength.

For nearly half-an-hour he paced about in moody silence, and then, in company with some of his courtiers, he went to the tent where the monks and nuns had erected a temporary chapel. After his devotions he rose and was coming away when a nun, closely veiled, approached, and, kneeling at his feet, touched his hand.

"Sire, I have a boon to crave."

"An it is in our power to grant it, it is yours sweet sister, for the asking," the King replied.

"Your heart sire is ever ready to feel for your humble supplicants, and, knowing that, I have dared to approach your Grace to plead on behalf of an unhappy young man, now a prisoner."

The King looked a little irritated, as he asked quickly—

"To whom dost thou refer?"

"To Robert de Burgh, who lies in Bransxton Prison." James's brow darkened, as he answered—

"Know you not, sister, that this same Robert de Burgh for whom thou pleadest has sorely offended us and abused our Royal favour."

"Indeed, Sire, I do know it, but he is a young man, and the folly of his youth may well be pardoned."

"By my faith, but I hold not that opinion," the

King answered sternly. "His offence is heavy, and though we might have forgiven him for the offence against ourselves, we cannot overlook his sin against one whom we love."

The nun seemed much agitated, and was evidently labouring from suppressed excitement. She showed this agitation when she spoke—

"Ah, Sire, the one to whom you refer would, I am sure, freely forgive him."

"How know you that?" the King asked sharply. "Who are you that you speak with such assurance?"

"I am a very humble woman, sire," the nun replied, as, bowing her head, she crossed her hands upon her bosom; "one upon whom the burden of life has weighed heavily, and I seek to lighten it now by devoting myself to deeds of mercy."

"And think you it is a deed of mercy that a man should escape the penalty due for a great wrong?"

"In faith I do, sire."

"And wherefore take you so much interest in this young man who has insulted us, stained his honour, and trifled with the feelings of the lady whom we had intended him to wed? Who art thou?"

Still, with drooped head and hands crossed the nun stood before him, and, speaking in low tones, she made answer—

"I am a servant of the Church, sire."

"Remove thy veil, and let me see thy face."

"Nay, sire, I cannot comply with your request."

"Say you so," the King cried angrily. "Are our royal commands of so little weight that they can be thus disobeyed? Again we say that we would see your face."

The nun was agitated, and trembled, but she exclaimed supplicatingly—

"Oh, great King, be not angry with me, but I must decline to comply with your Grace's commands."

The King stamped his foot, he did not like to be

thwarted, and with a sudden movement he attempted to remove the nun's veil, saying—

“Our royal will must be thy pleasure.”

The nun uttered a little cry, and at that instant a cowled monk stepped forward, and, interposing himself between the King and the nun, he said sternly, as he held up his crucifix—

“This woman is under the protection of the Church, and the crucifix is the Church's symbol. Even royalty itself must respect the Church.”

The King was abashed, and his face was very red, but looking at the monk he said—

“Thou art bold.”

“Sire, the Church is ever bold in defence of those who are under its shelter.”

The King was unmistakably annoyed, but, controlling his temper as best he could, he said—

“We bow to that decree, and yet we fain would know who the good sister is who pleads so earnestly and interestedly for a man who has so seriously incurred our royal displeasure.”

“We sink our identity in our religious garb,” the monk answered, as he made obeisance, “and in our holy calling we are known as brothers and sisters only.”

The nun, who had been standing a little apart, took a few steps forward, and kneeling at the feet of the King said in a broken voice—

“Does your Grace intend to allow my prayer to remain unanswered?”

“What prayer hast thou made, sister?”

“I have prayed that Robert de Burgh might be released and restored to your royal favour.”

The King, who was evidently very angry at having been rebuked and checked by the monk, was in so irritable a mood now, that he answered with a roughness of tone that was unusual with him—

“Thy prayer, sister, will certainly not be answered.

Robert de Burgh will remain a prisoner until we have decided what punishment will be awarded to him."

The nun uttered a little sob, and catching the King's hand, she pressed it to her lips, and said faintly—

"Farewell, sire, and may all the saints in heaven guard you during the coming struggle with your country's foes."

James seemed touched, and his lips moved as if he were about to answer, but suddenly checking himself, he walked away and passed out of the tent. Then the nun uttered a cry of pain, and fell fainting to the ground.

The King returned to his own tent. He was moody almost to sullenness. He felt that there was some mystery about the nun which he would have liked to have solved, but even his kingly might was not strong enough to break down that barrier of sanctuary which the Church afforded, though to be rebuked and humbled by an ordinary monk was very galling; it is more than probable that James would have been indiscreet enough to have made further effort to have had his royal will respected; but at that moment a bugle sounded, and a herald was conducted into the royal presence, where doffing his cap and bending his knee he craved audience for his master, Sir Hugh de Burgh.

Irritated as he already was, James was by no means pleased as he heard for whom the audience was craved. He remembered the trouble he had had in the past with this same Hugh de Burgh, and the more recent trouble he had had with Sir Hugh de Burgh's son; and now, through this very son, he had suffered an affront at the hands of an unknown monk. Nevertheless he felt that he could not refuse the audience asked for, and permission was therefore given for the Border chief to enter. Clad in complete armour, but with his head bare, Sir Hugh strode into the royal tent. His face was hot and flushed, and he looked angry and excited. Kneeling on one knee he exclaimed brusquely—

"Sire, I come to crave that steps may be taken to rescue my son, who lies in Braxxston gaol. He has been cast into prison without trial, and at a time when his sword should have been allowed to retrieve his knightly honour, now Braxxston is in the hands of the Saxons, and, unless speedily rescued, my son will either be slain by them or kept as a prisoner in their accursed country."

The King's brow darkened. The imperative tone of the suppliant still further angered him, and he was startled as he heard for the first time that his foes had advanced so close to his own position as to be in possession of Braxxston. Although this fact was known to most of his staff, it had been withheld from the King.

With the dignity which he knew so well how to assume when occasion required, he said—

"Your son is our prisoner, Sir Hugh de Burgh, and we know how to take care of him."

"But my son should be free," cried Sir Hugh, feeling anger in turn.

"*Should be*," cried the King. "You speak commandingly, sir, and it ill becomes a subject to command his monarch."

"I speak feelingly," answered Sir Hugh, as he rose with a haughty mien.

The King's anger increased.

"And think you, sirrah, that *we* have no feeling. Think you that the lady whom your son has cruelly deceived is without feeling. Your son has insulted and offended us, and we know how to punish insult."

"I admit that my son has erred grievously." Sir Hugh returned proudly, "but at such an hour as this his error should be condoned."

It was unfortunate for Sir Hugh de Burgh that he adopted the tone and manner he did, for the King, who was already smarting from the rebuff administered to him by the monk, was in no humour to be dictated to.

He was haughty and passionate when his pride was touched.

"You address your King, sirrah," he cried passionately. "We are the best judges as to when an error should be condoned."

With flashing eyes, Sir Hugh looked defiance at the King. Then putting on his plumed casque, he strode hastily from the royal tent to the amazement of every one present, and hurried to his own quarters. Arrived there, he was white with rage, and calling for David the Raven, he exclaimed—

"By heaven, not even the King himself shall treat Sir Hugh de Burgh with disdain. An there were twenty thousand Englishmen in Braxston, I would deliver my son out of their hands. What, ho! David to arms. We will hew ourselves a passage through the Saxon ranks, and open Robert's prison door."

He called in vain, however, for the Raven, for the Raven was not there to answer, and nobody could tell where he had gone to.

"By the good Lord in Heaven," cried Sir Hugh, beside himself with rage, "but even my henchman deserts me."

Then he ordered his lieutenant to sound his bugles as a signal for his followers to get into their saddles, and in a few minutes the angry chief with his three hundred fighting men were speeding like a whirlwind towards Braxston village.

CHAPTER XXXII

“AH! NOBLE, GENEROUS, KINGLY KING”

THE haughtiness and rudeness of Sir Hugh de Burgh was a further blow to James's pride; but he was perfectly well aware that at the present time he had no means of humbling the proud Border chief, who with his small but compact and faithful band of fighting men was so far master of the situation. It is highly probable that the King, in his own mind, determined on some course to pursue to mark his deep displeasure of Robert and his father's conduct, but he had no opportunity of giving expression to his thoughts to those around him, for exciting events were at hand, and his attention was now drawn to the English army, which, as was well known in the Scottish camp, had encamped the previous night at Barmoor Wood, and much conjecture had been rife amongst the Scots as to what was the intention of the Earl of Surrey, who was in command of the English. But suddenly the conjecture gave rise to amazement, not altogether unmingled with consternation, for the English hosts were seen to be on the move, and while part made their way to the ford of Sandy, at the bend of the River Till, the major portion of them marched in a line with the Till and towards the Tweed.

The march towards the ford was intelligible enough, as that would lead them direct to the ridge of Flodden, where the Scottish army lay; but what did the other part of the army mean by heading for the Tweed? It

was this mysterious movement that caused consternation amongst the Scots, for it was suggested that those making for the ford intended to create a diversion, while the rest of the army marched straight on to Edinburgh. With strained and anxious eyes, their waving banners and glinting arms were watched. A cloud of dust marked their progress, and their beating drums could be heard as the sounds floated on the breeze.

Surrounded by his noblemen, all eager for the fray, King James stood and watched his enemy moving along like a great glittering serpent in the brilliant sunlight. His face wore a pained and anxious look. He noted his diminished strength with concern, and no wonder that he felt anxious as he saw his foes filing along, thousands upon thousands strong. Then by a sudden movement they turned in their march, and the mystery was explained. They intended to cross the Twizel Bridge, which, with its fluted arch, spanned the Till, and was plainly visible from the King's position.

The King and his nobles noted this adroit and skilful move on the part of the English with perfect amazement. They had always looked for their enemy south, and never imagined that he would come down upon them from the north. And yet this is precisely what Surrey had done. He had marched due north from Wooler-Haugh, where he had lain till the previous morning; and from Barwood he had headed north-west, until sweeping with his baggage and artillery over the bridge of the Till he turned south to where on Flodden Hill the Scotch awaited.

It was an audacious movement, but it also displayed a brilliant stroke of military genius, which confounded James, who, while brave and daring, lacked the military skill necessary to cope with such a commander as Surrey. The two great streams of soldiers were now converging upon the King's position. The rearguard under Surrey himself was filing over Sandyford, and the

vanguard under Lord Thomas Howard flowed over the bridge of Twizel, so that a mighty host actually stood between Scotland and her army, and before that army could return to its northern land that host must be shattered and routed.

But could that be done?

That question flitted through the minds of the watchers who, though dauntless as lions, were nevertheless to be pardoned for experiencing some anxiety. And truly those on coming hosts seemed as legions. They covered the land in serried masses, their lines stretched unbroken for miles. It was a grand and stirring sight, thrilling in its indications of might and martial pomp. The neigh of the restless war horses could be distinctly heard, and the beat of the drums, the rumbling of the guns, the tramp of thousands and thousands of heavy feet filled the air. King James was fretful and feverish, and, but for the wiser counsels of his nobles, he would have rushed headlong towards his foes. But those counsels availed, for, as his friends pointed out, to go towards the English would be to place himself in their power, as he occupied an exceptionally strong position on a commanding height, and to descend from that position would necessarily be to sacrifice all the advantages which it afforded. But James was chivalrous to a fault, and he did not like the idea of having any advantages, though such as they were they were certainly counterbalanced by the superior numbers of the enemy.

Although the King allowed himself to be thus ruled, he was nevertheless ill at ease, and he chafed like a newly-caged lion; and wishing to be alone with his thoughts for a brief space, he withdrew a little from the brilliant throng that surrounded him; and so with drooping and downcast head, and his hands reverently crossed upon his breast, he walked away some paces behind the tent from whence his royal banner fluttered, and seemed to wave defiance at the enemy. Suddenly

he became conscious that he was not alone, for close to his elbow a veiled nun stood. Where she had come from, or how she came to be so near him he did not know, though it is highly probable she had been watching him, and had taken this opportunity to come up. His face showed that he was not altogether pleased, but, before he could make remark, she said in lowly tones—

“Your Grace is troubled.”

Recognising the voice as the voice of the nun he had held conversation with in the tent, and which seemed to him to be strangely familiar, he answered—

“Yes, sister, I am troubled about many things. But wherefore do you come to me again?”

“Because I fain would hope, that in this hour of trial, when enemies encompass you, and the air is heavy with the strife of war, a woman’s voice may soothe you.”

“Ay, so it might,” he answered quickly, “but your voice reminds me too forcibly of one who is very dear to me. Nay, I could almost swear that you are she.”

The nun drew back as he took a step towards her, and, showing by her movements that she was alarmed, she said—

“And the lady of whom you speak, sire. Where is she?”

“At our palace in Edinburgh, if she be not here.”

“And wherefore should she be here?”

“Nay, I trow not, save it were to be near me.”

“She loves you, then?”

“Ay, as the child may love its father.”

“Glad am I, then, that my poor voice reminds you of her,” answered the nun, “for there may be comfort in that.”

“Alas! no, sister,” sighed the King, “for your sweetness only serves to remind me how lonely she is, and still more lonely she will be if I lose my life in the coming fight.”

“An she were here, Sire. what would you do?”

“An she were here! She would not dare to come

without my knowledge; and she did, even my love for her would not mask my anger."

"Poor girl," the nun said, with a sigh.

"Poor girl! And wherefore is she poor? Is she not rich in a King's love; and has she not all that she can desire in the luxury of a court?"

"Alas! even a King's love may be a torture, and the luxury of a court a mockery. Perhaps in her loneliness she sighs for something humbler, but more enduring."

"It may be so, it may be so," the King murmured thoughtfully, as he put his hand to his forehead. Then turning to the nun, he said—

"I know that her heart has been trifled with."

"God and His angels comfort her," the nun ejaculated, with great fervour; then she added—"When the heart is broken, comfort can only come from heaven."

"Your mission is one of holiness; your teachings are peace," the King remarked, with moving pathos; "therefore I fain would entrust you with a message to her. Say that she is to look to heaven for comfort; and tell her that her King in the hour of mortal strife, when his enemies were closing around him, sent her his blessing and his love."

The nun was sobbing, and it was with difficulty she was enabled to say—

"Your word's sire, shall be faithfully conveyed; and knowing her, as I have already told you I do, I vouch for it that she will treasure that message, and the words will graven themselves on her heart."

"Alas! poor heart," the King muttered, in great agitation.

The nun approached nearer to him, and kneeling at his feet she took his hand and laid her cheek against it.

"Once again, Sire," she said in broken tones, "I am going to utter a prayer, and I crave you grant it."

"What is it, sister?" he asked.

"I pray your forgiveness for Robert de Burgh."

The King's brow darkened, and he exclaimed—

"He is a knave——"

"Ah, no. Say not so, Sire."

The King was very much agitated, and, disengaging his hand, he moved backwards and forwards for a few moments, while the nun still knelt, and told her beads. Suddenly he stopped, and, looking down on the kneeling figure, he said prevaricatingly—

"Know you not, sister, that Robert de Burgh lies in Braxxston Jail, and Braxxston is in the hands of the Saxon soldiers."

"In truth, your grace, I know it; but not even Saxon soldiers make war upon women who wear the garb of holiness. Therefore I may safely penetrate their ranks, and, seeking the lonely prisoner, cheer his drooping spirits by giving him your Grace's message."

"But his conduct has been very flagrant, and deserving of heavy penalty," urged the King, still experiencing a difficulty in making up his mind.

"That may be so," replied the nun. "But however heavy our faults may be, we expect and ask heaven to forgive us. Therefore let us forgive our earthly enemies, that we may be forgiven by heaven."

"Thou pleadest well," said the King; "and though my heart had been stone thou wouldst have moved it."

"Then Robert de Burgh is forgiven?" the nun exclaimed, with evident delight in her tone.

"Yes."

"Will you deign to give me a sign, your Majesty, that I may take it to him?"

"I add a condition to this forgiveness," the King added quickly, "which is that Robert de Burgh, as soon as he can regain his freedom, hastens to Edinburgh and makes Beatrix Thirlstane his wife."

"A pardon that is burdened with a condition is only half a pardon," the nun replied, to the King's disappointment. "If there is no true love between this man and woman it would be worse than folly to force

them to wed, for he would come to hate her, and she would pine of neglect.”

“ You teach me my duty, sister,” the King said, much moved, so that tears gathered in his eyes : “ and you have, with your woman’s art, moulded me to your will. Take this signet ring, and I charge you convey it to Robert de Burgh, and with your own hand place it upon his finger. Tell him that his King, whom he wronged and deceived, sent it with his blessing and forgiveness, and that whenever he looks at it, it is to be an incentive to honest duty and a prayerful life.”

“ Ah, noble, generous, kindly King,” cried the nun with enthusiasm, as, rising to her feet, she kissed his hand several times ; and taking the ring, she pressed that to her lips, and then put it into her bosom. And now, Sire, grant me another favour, I crave.”

“ Name it, sister.”

“ Give me some token that I may cherish it for my dear King’s sake.”

“ That will I,” the King cried readily, but nevertheless feeling considerable surprise. “ But you have awakened in me a burning curiosity, and I fain would know who you are.”

“ I am a daughter of the Church,” she answered quickly, drawing from him and folding her hands on her breast.—

“ Ay, truly,” the King replied, “ but even a daughter of the Church is a woman, and women have hearts. I fain would tear aside that tantalising veil, and look upon your face.”

“ That must you not do,” she cried in some alarm, as he seemed inclined to give practical effect to his words. “ In the name of that which you hold most sacred, I charge you respect my desire for concealment.”

“ As you will,” the King answered sorrowfully, and with a sigh of resignation. “ But tell me, how long have you been a daughter of the Church ? ”

“ Alas, too short a time, your Grace.”

"You prevaricate," the King said, with some irritation. "Answer my next question more frankly. Have you ever loved?"

The nun lowered her eyes, and said in whisper tones—

"I have, Sire."

"And have been deceived?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"And that deception broke your heart?"

"Well, it made me feel that life was burdensome."

"And so, as a solace for your woes, you sought the solace of the church?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Does it give you the peace you desired?"

"It impresses me with a sense of my usefulness. I feel now that in a humble way I am doing some good."

"But still that wound in your heart remains."

"The scar does."

"It is the same thing. The burden of your dead love lies coldly and heavily upon you, and it will never leave you while life remains."

"The burden of my dead love has been lightened by my sacred duties," the nun sighed.

"And you have found comfort?"

"Indeed I have Sire, and peace from the turbulence of the world, and rest after the world's strife. The Church is verily a haven, after the storms and passions of the outer world. Earth holds nothing that can bring true happiness. To heaven alone we must look for that."

The King was thoughtful for some moments. Then he asked—

"And for a woman with a sore at her heart, you would recommend the Church?"

"In faith I would, Sire. In the Church's fold she will find much to distract her thoughts from worldly things. She will learn how fleeting and evanescent are the things of this life, and that there is no true joy, no true repose, no true peace here. Her hopes will

grow stronger, and she will turn her eyes to heaven for the solace which she cannot find below.”

“You speak well, sister.”

“And truly, Sire.”

“Ay, and truly, as I believe. And now I charge you with another mission. You will have duties enough here to engage you for some time: for the God of War thirsts for blood, and on the field of carnage you will be able to whisper sweet words to many a dying soul. But when there are no longer any dying to whisper to, hie you away from these awful scenes, and go to our palace in Edinburgh. See Beatrix Thirlstane, and give her this opal ring. She knows it well, for it was a gift from her to me. Tell her that by the memories it conjures up, I charge her enter the church, in order that she may come to know comfort and peace. It will be a shelter to her should I never return. Tell her”—here the King paused and wiped his eyes—“tell her,” he went on, “that I tried hard to promote her happiness; that I sought to brighten her life, but I failed. For that she must forgive me.”

The nun was weeping bitterly, and once more kneeling at the King's feet.

“If there be aught to forgive,” she said in a broken voice, “I promise, in the name of Beatrix Thirlstane, that it shall be forgiven.”

“Rise,” the King said gently, “and give me your hand.” The nun did as he desired, and held forth a plump, white hand, which he took and kissed three times. “My blessing goes with my kiss,” he said. “Peace be ever with you. You have done me good. Your resignation and gentleness have taught me patience. If I fall in the fight, pray for me. And now, I beseech you, leave me, for I would be alone for a brief space with my thoughts. Farewell! Farewell!!” he repeated with great emphasis, as if by some strange prescience he foresaw his end.

The nun tried to make some answer, but she was

evidently so overcome by emotion that she could not speak, and so she slowly moved away, glancing round every now and then to look at the King, who remained buried in thought, and oblivious to all around him. But suddenly his reverie was broken by the blast of a bugle, and a plumed warrior galloped up, and making a hasty, military salute to the King, he exclaimed excitedly—

“Sire, the English have commenced the attack.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

"WE MUST FIGHT TO THE DEATH"

The reader will remember that when Robert De Burgh was sunk in despair, and was chafing his heart out in the little prison of Braxxston, he was suddenly surprised by the opening of the door, and the appearance of Reuben Godstone on the threshold. This apparition was the more surprising because both the person and his appearance were totally unexpected. Robert had only seen Reuben two or three times, and his attention had been drawn to the boy by his pretty and girlish-looking face. Robert had, however, forgotten all about him, and therefore he was disposed to doubt the evidence of his eyes as he saw the boy standing there.

"Reuben's attitude was that of alarm and caution. He put his finger up as if to enjoin silence on the prisoner, then he slightly bent his head as if in the act of listening. Robert was the first to speak.

"What has brought *you* here?" he asked.

"Caution and good legs," the boy answered.

"But how did you get admission into the prison?"

"In the same way that a rat gets admission to its hole, I crept in."

"You are a smart youth," said Robert, who, in spite of his misery, felt amused. "And now, tell me, what is your purpose?"

"To let you out."

Robert's heart quickened at the words. Was it a

fact, then, that this insignificant page boy was to prove his liberator.

"You are a brave boy," he said, moving forward towards the door.

"Stay," exclaimed Reuben. "The utmost caution is necessary, for our enemies surround us. The English soldiers are everywhere, but they are so intent on the coming battle, that I have managed to escape their vigilance."

"How did you gain access to this dungeon?" Robert asked, unable even in his excitement to suppress his curiosity.

"The gaoler is dead," Reuben answered. "He has been shot, and was lying in the passage near the door. His bunch of keys was attached to his belt, and as I did not consider that a dead man would find any use for prison keys, I possessed myself of them."

"You are a noble, brave boy, and shall be mightily rewarded!" Robert exclaimed enthusiastically.

"No," said Reuben hanging his head. "I want no reward beyond being allowed to follow you into the battle. I am but a humble page, and you are my master's son, it is for that reason I render you this service."

"You are young yet; little more than a child, life lies before you; therefore talk not of going to the battle where arrows and spears respect no person, whether he be page or King. But for this act you shall learn that a De Burgh knows how to reward faithful service."

"I want no reward," the boy repeated proudly, "and for me, life has lost its savour. Therefore I care not if I fall upon the field."

"We will discuss that anon," answered Robert, scarcely able to suppress a smile. "Now from your speech I should say some baby girl has played with your heart."

Reuben straightened himself up. His eyes flashed, and his face was very red, as he answered—

"Make not light, good master, of woes you understand not. When your heart has been wrung as mine has been, you will know then what it is to have a silent sorrow."

Robert burst into a laugh. He could not possibly help it, for it seemed so ludicrous to hear this frail boy, whose years apparently were so few, talk seriously about a "silent sorrow."

Reuben was evidently annoyed at being laughed at, and said impatiently, and with some sharpness—

"Reserve your laughing, sir, for serious work lies before us. It is not likely that you can understand my feelings, for if you do possess such a thing as a heart, it must be as hard as a nether millstone."

"What mean you, boy?"

"If all be true what gossips tell, you have played fast and loose with more than one woman. A man who is false to his sworn love-vows should be tortured."

"A noble sentiment of a very green youth," exclaimed Robert, "but all that will be taken out of you before you come to my years."

"Indeed," said the page with a sneer. "An my disposition is the same as yours it may," he added with irony.

"Forgive me, sweet youth, if I have done you wrong," said Robert, as he caught the page in his arms, and kissed him on the forehead.

Reuben became greatly agitated, and seemed to thrill with some emotion, while his face reddened to a deep crimson. He released himself from Robert's embrace, and said—

"We have no time to lose; we must make our way out of the village by stealth, for our enemies surround us." He moved down the passage, Robert followed him with palpitating heart, and a sense of joy at the prospect of liberty that threatened to find vent in a great cry. But a short time ago he was sunk in the depths of despair. Now his hopes were high, for his

prison door was open, and the joys of freedom were before him.

They made their way down to the entrance of the building, where they found the stalwart Raven posted on guard. The meeting between Robert and David was marked by hurried expressions of warmth and affection.

"The devil stew me if this is not the happiest moment of my life," David cried, as he gripped his master's hand in his ponderous fingers. "You must thank this bonny lad, Reuben, however, for it was he who planned it. He brought me here to set you free. But we have to get out of the trap yet, so don't let us waste time. Come."

Robert was about to make some inquiry, when he was checked by the rythmical tramp of soldiers. The three drew back into the passage, and screened themselves behind the ponderous door that led into the street. Then in the course of a few minutes a troop of English soldiers marched past, and when the sound of their footsteps could be no longer heard, the Raven stepped forth and said—

"We have not a moment to lose. Come."

He then led the way, followed by Reuben and De Burgh, and as the latter stepped into the street, and once more breathed the air of freedom, he was unusually agitated.

There were no signs of life. The houses were all shut up, for the people had fled. It might have been a city of the dead, save that now and again there was borne upon the breeze the clanking of arms, and the sound of hoarse voices subdued by distance.

The Raven seemed to be intimate with the village, for he led the way without hesitation. Suddenly he stopped and said—

"The outskirts of the town are crowded with soldiers, and we must run the gauntlet. I have two pistols, take you one my master."

They had debouched into the open country, and on

all sides they could see masses of soldiers moving to and fro. This was the only way of escape, and, if they could succeed in crossing a track of heathery land that was almost perfectly flat for nearly a mile, they would gain a patch of rising ground crowned with trees, and from thence they could pass to the Scottish lines.

They proceeded for some distance without seeming were noticed, and four men were seen to move across to attract attention; then it became evident that they their path.

"Let us turn back," said Robert, thinking that they might find another way of escape.

"No, let us go forward," said the Raven, and, grasping his pistol firmly, and drawing his long dirk, he advanced, Robert also on his guard close behind him, while the page, looking very pale, brought up the rear.

When they had advanced some little distance, they were met and confronted by the four soldiers, who stopped and challenged them. The Raven's answer was a well aimed bullet, which found its billet in the foremost man's skull, so that the unfortunate fellow pitched forward on to his face, dead. This sudden and unexpected incident seemed for a few moments to demoralise the other three soldiers, and they hesitated. That hesitation enabled David to dart forward and snatch the powerful short sword or knife from the dead man's hand, he handed the sword to Robert de Burgh.

"Forward," he exclaimed, glancing round to see that Reuben was safe.

The three sprang forward and were instantly met by the soldiers, and a hand to hand encounter took place, but the giant David laid about him so lustily that one of the other soldiers went down with his skull clove, and another was disabled by a wound in his sword arm. Escape might have been possible now, but unfortunately the report of the pistol had given the alarm, and masses of men on horse and foot commenced to move rapidly forward towards the fugitives.

"We must fight to the death," muttered the Raven between clenched teeth.

Robert took in the situation at once. He saw that if he would escape it was indeed a fight to the death; but even then the chances of success were remote. On the other hand, if he were to surrender he would certainly be sent into England as a prisoner of war, and hopes of reinstating himself in the King's favour would probably never be realised. Surrender, however, would never have entered his head, had it not been for the look he gave at Reuben. The poor lad seemed faint and pale, and Robert felt that it was his bounden duty while life remained to him, to protect that boy. Yet how could he do it against a regiment of fighting men. For himself he absolutely had no concern, at that moment he was indifferent about his life, and he felt that he might as well die there as elsewhere, but for his sake Reuben had perilled his life, and he must endeavour to save that life for him.

"Keep close to me, boy," he said; "or an you would preserve your life, give yourself up to these soldiers, who would surely respect your youth."

Reuben looked at Robert with something like a look of scorn as he answered—

"I may be young and weak, but I am no craven. If you fall, I care not if I fall too."

Robert cast a hasty glance at the speaker, and he wondered what he had done to win this youth's attachment. But there was not much time for speech or thought then, for the soldiers were surrounding them, and they were challenged to surrender.

David made a dash at the foremost men, crying as he turned hastily to his companion. "Have at them, for life and country."

In a moment he was fighting against tremendous odds, his powerful arms enabling him to deliver death-dealing blows, and with a few rapid strokes he had already made two of his foes bite the dust.

With the page close behind him, Robert stood on the defensive, watching for an opportunity to make a dash forward. The forces, however, that were arrayed against them were too powerful to be overcome by two men, and Robert saw with dismay that the brave Raven was being overwhelmed; he sprang forward just in time to parry a pike thrust that, had it taken effect, would certainly have stretched David lifeless on the ground.

There was no time for thought now. The soldiers pressed upon them, and they would undoubtedly have been borne down had it not been for the extraordinary power of David. His muscular strength was simply amazing, and, added to this, he was a very master of the art of fence, so that it was almost impossible for his foes to get a blow home. The Raven parried every thrust and displayed such skill with his short, powerful sword that he had placed half-a-dozen or more of his antagonists *hors de combat*. Although Robert had nothing of the strength, and was lacking in the skill of the Raven, he nevertheless held his ground and fought furiously. Once or twice he cast a hurried glance at poor little Reuben, the page. He was crouching on the ground some yards away, and in the *melee* nobody seemed to notice him save Robert, and even he was powerless to render assistance.

The Raven had managed to get close to Robert, and telling him to set back to back, he continued fighting with fatal effect on those who were opposed to him. Numbers, however, soon began to tell, and the English soldiers were so exasperated as they saw their comrades fall that they cried out—

“Hew them down; hew them down. Have at them.”

At this moment the attention of all was arrested by a mighty cloud of dust that seemed to be advancing on the wings of a whirlwind. In a few moments the cloud appeared to flash fire. Then the earth fairly trembled beneath the on-coming rush of a troop of mounted men,

who, riding knee to knee, swept onward in a compact body like an avalanche, and with the avalanche's roar.

The English were alarmed, for they concluded that a large mass of troops were about to attack them, and so they threw themselves on the defensive, forgetting for the moment David and Robert, who thus got a brief space in which to breathe. Suddenly the Raven raised a mighty shout, and cried—

“Ho, ho! De Burgh to the rescue.”

In the oncoming troop of horsemen he recognised the banner of his master, and Sir Hugh himself was riding at the head of his men, for after having had an interview with the King he had as the reader knows, gathered his followers, and ridden off to attempt the rescue of his son. In a few moments these wild riders had dashed into the English foot, sweeping them away like chaff, though not without loss to themselves, as was told too surely by the empty saddles.

David and Robert were soon recognised, and again the cry was raised of “De Burgh to the Rescue.” This had the effect of stimulating the men, who fought like wild Indians.

It was a short, sharp, terrible struggle, and the horsemen, used as they were to border raiding, decidedly had the best of it. There were dust and noise, fierce shouts and piercing groans, steel clashed against steel, and the report of firearms added to the din. It was hideous while it lasted, but soon the English were falling back before the onslaught, for they were too few to withstand it; and at length, losing touch of each other, they broke into a rout. A shout of triumph from the De Burghs' clan told of victory.

It had all been like a dream to Robert. A phantasmagoria of the brain, as it were, that had bewildered him.

“Quick boy, mount, and let us away,” he heard a voice say, and turning he beheld his father, who was holding the bridle of a horse, whose previous rider had

gone down in the dust. Robert was about to spring up when he remembered the page. “Ah, Reuben, where is he,” he cried in distress, then he was about to rush away to search, when he beheld David the Raven coming with gigantic strides towards him, and bearing in his arms the lifeless body of poor Reuben.

There was no time for examination or question. It was sufficient to see that Reuben was quite still; his face was chalky white and besmirched with blood. Robert sprang into the saddle. David mounted another horse, placing the slight figure of the page boy in front of him; then the “rally and retreat” were sounded, and the little troop of fierce warriors were tearing back to the Scottish camp. On arrival there they found all in excitement, for the English were marching to the attack, and the battle could not now be delayed long.

As soon as the panting and foam-flecked horses were reigned in, Robert sprang down and took the still insensible Reuben from David. The poor boy was still breathing, and carrying him in his arms like a child, Robert hurried to the tent of the nuns. He was met by a priest, and to him Robert exclaimed—

“In the name of all that is holy, I claim your best care and skill for this poor lad. He has been wounded sorely, but I would fain hope his life is not ebbing away.”

“Leave him with us, my son,” the priest said, “and we will try, with the help of God, to save him.”

A nun came forward, she laid Reuben on a pallet, and commenced to search for the wound.

“Poor boy, poor boy, you have saved my life,” Robert murmured, as he stooped and kissed the cold white forehead, about which the fair curls clustered, massed together with blood. Then he rose, and craving a blessing from the priest, he hurried away to join his clan, for the shrill notes of the bugles told that the battle had begun.

CHAPTER XXXIV

“HOW SCOTLAND’S POWER WAS BROKEN, AND
SCOTLAND’S KING WAS DEAD”

With extraordinary military genius, and with tactical strategy that aroused the admiration of their foes, the English army gradually took up their position in six divisions on the fatal field of Flodden. On the ridge of Branxston Hill the Scotch were arrayed panting and eager for the fray. King James surveyed the vast multitude of his opponents with some concern. He believed that he was outnumbered, and that the struggle must necessarily be fierce and savage. Around him were gathered his nobles, both of Church and State, and they shared with him his anxiety, for no man there could help feeling that tremendous issues depended on the fight. The independence of Scotland was at stake, and if the day were against the King, it would be woe indeed for Scotland. Thousands of those brave northerners cast wistful glances back towards their beloved country that they might never see again.

With thoughtful mein the King stood a little apart.

His heart was heavy and sad. But still he did not despair. He had faith in his star, and he could not bring himself to believe that it was doomed to set for ever on that eventful day.

The slanting rays of the sun showed that the day was declining, and there was a calmness in the air, and a sense of peace and rest over the glorious landscape

that was strangely out of harmony with all the tremendous mass of fighting men, who were only awaiting the signal to fly at each other's throats. The elevated position of the Scotch on the ridge gave them command of an extended panorama, embracing the greater part of Berwickshire and Roxburghshire, and even of the hilly country of Selkirkshire, over which hung a dreamy haze of golden mist, while the rugged outlines of the hills were toned and softened by distance. It was a magnificent picture so far as nature was concerned, and not a few of those who gazed upon it were moved to tears.

An ominous silence had fallen upon the massed armies. It was the silence before the storm. The King issued his final orders, and his lieutenants carried them out without excitement. But gradually the silence was broken, and men galloped wildly about the brow of the hill, and in the plain below. Then from rank to rank the signal flew, and the shrill blasts of the trumpets sounded for the charge. Suddenly a sheet of flame leapt from the King's ridge, and the thunder of the cannon awoke the echoes of the surrounding country. This was answered again by the English cannon on the plain, and the massive iron balls tore through the ranks of both armies, and many a gallant fellow bit the dust. From the battlefield rose a mighty cloud of smoke, which, hanging in the calm air like a pall, obscured the field in shadow. The artillery practice, however, did not last long. It was too slow a method for men who were straining to get at each other, and soon the roar of guns ceased. The leashes, so to speak, were slipped, and foe met foe, foot to foot, and breast to breast. With a wild slogan cry the Highlanders bounded down the hill with a fierce rush, and were immediately engaged in a deadly struggle with the vanguard of the English army, who, taken by surprise with the impetuosity and the suddenness of the attack, fell back, but rallied again immediately, only to be beaten back once more ; cheered

by their commanders, however, they made a tremendous onslaught on the attacking foe until the ground was strewn with the dead and dying. Once more did the wonderful vigour of the Highlanders tell in their favour, and the English were pressed back, being greatly outnumbered, and had this advantage been skilfully followed up, the story of Flodden Field might have been a different one. But it was not to be. A large body of horse came to the rescue, under Bastard Heron, and checked the victorious career of this wing of the Scottish army. Sword and spear clashed, and cloth yard shafts filled the air with dismal wailing. The King had witnessed this engagement, and seeing that it was necessary now to strike an effective blow, he ordered his body guard and his nobles to descend from their vantage ground and engage the foe on the plain. His body guard was composed almost entirely of nobles. They were men of indomitable courage to whom the din of battle was a shout of glory. They needed no second command from their King, but they saw, alas! that he was sacrificing a splendid position that gave him great advantage; and some of them urged him to remain where he was, and let the English come up the hill. But James believed that he was not matching himself equally against the foe, and so, with extraordinary chivalry he refused to listen to the counsel of his friends, and they plunged down into the thick of the fight, with their beloved King leading them, for he would not yield the post of danger to anyone.

Fearful was the struggle and terrible the slaughter for the English billmen, who were the best fighters in the world, fought like furies, and blood rushed forth even as water rushes from a hill side.

Hitherto the Scotch had professed to look with contempt upon the English as fighters, but they had now to learn how infinitely superior the Southerners were in their knowledge of weapons and how to use them, no less than in the art of war. The Scotch were good fighters, but the English were better.

Surrounded by his devoted followers the King fought like a lion, although he had already received a severe wound. With despair he saw his noble friends yield up their lives in his cause; but for all the sickening sacrifice, he realised with aching heart that the battle was going against him. Devotion and valour, and the outpouring of noble blood could not avail to stop their equally determined foe. The English archers poured in their shafts like hail, and the Scotch were mowed down like wheat before the sickle. Suddenly a body of horsemen came up with a furious rush, and a cry of "De Burgh to the Rescue." It was Sir Hugh and his borderers, and riding in the van were David the Raven and Robert. The latter urged his horse to near the King, and cutting down a man who was about to aim a blow at his Majesty he cried—

"Your Majesty, I give my poor life in your holy cause."

It was no time for speech or fair words. The King was hotly engaged, contesting every inch of ground, but he cast a look of admiration at Robert, who, encouraged by that, threw himself into the thick of the fight, followed by the devoted Raven, and many a gallant fellow went down under their rain of blows, never to rise again.

Around the King the battle raged with intense fury. The devoted followers of his Majesty tried with might and main to protect his revered person. But he was not the man to remain inactive when there were blows to be struck. He had been already twice wounded and his kingly blood was pouring away; but, with the desperate energy of despair, he fought savagely, and gave the quietus to many a one who essayed to attack him.

Among those nearest to the King's person were David the Raven and Robert de Burgh. David did terrible execution with his massive broadsword, and Robert fought with almost superhuman energy. He had

received a slight wound in the head, from which the blood had trickled down his face. He was covered with grime, dust, and perspiration, and his tunic had by some means been torn into rags. He and the stalwart Raven seemed to be endowed with charmed lives; for while scores of others close to them fell mortally wounded to the blood-stained earth, they escaped axe, spear, and arrow alike. The horses which they bestrode were powerful, high spirited brutes, and it may be that their very restlessness served to protect their riders.

Sir Hugh de Burgh fought desperately for some time, until a cloth-yard shaft pierced his brain, and he fell from his horse a corpse. His career had terminated as he himself would have desired it to terminate, amid the roar and excitement of battle, his little troop of well-trained followers had done great execution, but their ranks were sadly thinned now, and scarcely more than two dozen of them remained.

While the tide of battle thus ebbed and flowed around the King, who, as a central figure, distinguished himself by his gallantry, the conflict raged with no less intensity in other parts of the field.

But every where the English were completely triumphant. Their enemies were too enfeebled and disheartened to offer any serious opposition. The brave Stanley had removed every impediment, and with his flushed and elated followers, he marched to the top of the hill, where a little while before the King's standard had waved so proudly. But now all was desolation there. Dead and dying men encumbered the ground. The King's flag was trodden in the dust, for his standard-bearer had been slain; and the Royal tents were a heap of blackened ashes, having been set on fire at the commencement of the battle. The only tent remaining was that devoted to the monks and nuns. It stood in a little hollow in the rear of the hill, and thus was protected from the flying missiles. The monks and nuns flitted about the field of slaughter, speaking words of hope to those

whose eyes were closing for ever on earthly scenes, and stanching the blood of the less grievously wounded.

From the elevated position which he had reached, Stanley surveyed the battle field; and he saw that to the west of him the battle still raged with terrible fury. The waving flags and pennons, the flying shafts, the gleaming steel, the shouts of the victors mingled with the shrieks of the dying, told too surely how fearful the struggle was. And well it might be, for the King still lived, although desperately wounded, and his heroic followers, anxious to save, if possible, so precious a life, had formed a living wall around him, and fought with despairing energy, in the hope that they might yet turn the scales in their favour. But this was not to be. Stanley saw how the tide rolled, and he rallied his jaded and begrimed men for a desperate onslaught, and then, with one great cheer, his ten thousand followers tore down the hill again, and plunged into the strife once more, taking the King's forces in rear, so that they were thus hemmed in between their pitiless foes. Hundreds of those about his Majesty knew now that all hope had fled, and all they could do was to struggle desperately for dear life. But it was all useless. The bill and the bow and the cruel spear did awful execution in the hands of the flushed victors.

“Bravely was the field defended.

Victory's palm was long suspended,

Till some English, like tornado,

Rushed from deepest ambuscado.

Now the struggle was unequal,

Dreadful carnage crowned the sequel,

Hardy Scots, borne down by numbers,

Strewed the field in death's cold slumbers.”

The numbers of the English increased as those of the Scots decreased; from all sides the victors were pouring down, and they crowded in closer and closer, the heroes who still stood around their King. Surrender they might have done at that critical moment, and had they done so their dear King's life would have

been spared in all probability for a little while longer; but surrender was a word they knew not, and even if they had, is it likely that the King would have sanctioned its being uttered? They could die, and die they would, but surrender never. Desperate as the chances were against them, some still hoped that they might hold out until succour came up, and the day would be retrieved.

The ground, which was now absolutely saturated with blood, was so slippery that the men had the greatest difficulty to keep their feet, and to go down in that fierce human maelstrom was to be for ever lost. So the Scotch, or such of them as could do so, pulled off their shoes, and fought in their stocking feet. The King and his nobles had discarded their horses, in order that they might be equal with their humblest followers, and thus prove to the soldiers that they were resolved to conquer or to die. There was not a man there but what was animated by the wildest enthusiasm, and one and all were prepared to pour out their blood in defence of their country and their King.

This final struggle was grand and heroic, verging almost on the sublime. The central figure, the broken hearted King, and around him in solid phalanx the most noble blood and the most distinguished chivalry of his country. Thus hemmed in, they nevertheless did not lose heart, but fought so furiously that victory for a time trembled in the scale. The billmen plied their weapons with horrible effect, and crushed through helmet and plaited armour, while the long spear, wielded by furious men, did ghastly work.

On both sides men fell like wheat before the mower.

But the cheers of the English and the slogan cry of the Scotch were defiantly uttered, and served to animate the hearts of those who fought so heroically on each side. Wherever the King moved there was death, for he threw himself into the ranks of his men, and fought as gallantly as they, and so long as he lived it was

evident that the battle could be neither lost nor won. No doubt this feeling was prominent in both parties, and impelled each to extraordinary energy. The endurance and gallant bearing of the King, which had so distinguished him throughout that dreadful day, did not forsake him now, and he seemed capable, by his presence, of inspiring those around him. They fought hand-to-hand with their foes, and their piled up bodies told surely how they had carried out their determination to do or die. Nothing could have surpassed the splendid bravery of these combatants, but they nevertheless were cut down and slain around their monarch. All that they could do was surely done for Scotland's King; but alas! it was useless. They drenched the earth with their gore, and they yielded up their lives, but to no purpose.

And so it was with one and all. There was no shrinking! no recreant yielding; bishops and earls, lords and knights, squires and grooms, fought in emulation, and poured out their blood like water. And the King, seeing his devoted heroes slain around him, scorned to survive their fall, and placing himself where danger was most conspicuous, he was pierced by an arrow, but with the dauntless courage for which he was distinguished he still fought on, until an English billman cut him down, and he fell amidst the heaps of slain—fell dead on that gory bed of death.

This was the closing act of the bloody drama. The few of the King's noble followers who yet survived were surrounded on all sides by a countless multitude as with a living wall, from which issued destruction and death! and then there rose to the darkened heavens a mighty cheer from English throats, telling how Scotland's power was broken, and Scotland's King was dead.*

* King James was killed in the twenty-fifth year of his reign, and the thirty-ninth year of his age.

The King's body was subsequently taken to Berwick, where it was embalmed. From there it was removed to Newcastle thence to London ;

For a short while after this final blow there was some desultory fighting, fitful spurts, as it were, but they gradually died out, and the darkness of night drew a sable pall over that gory field. The cries of the wounded filled the air with mournful plaint, making the night hideous with human agony and over the battle ground there flitted ghouls, though they were fleshly ones, in the persons of border thieves, whose mission it was to plunder the dead. And other forms moved about, bent upon errands of mercy; these were the monks and nuns and one of them, carrying a small lanthorn, wandered alone, and now and again she sobbed heavily with the bitterness of a too heavy sorrow. Occasionally she stopped to moisten the lips of some dying wretch, for attached to her girdle she carried a large flask of water. Then she made her way to where that final and terrific struggle had taken place, and the flower of Scotland's manhood lay in one great heap; there she searched the faces of the dead by the light of her lanthorn; until at last completely overcome by the ghastly sight that met her gaze, she fell on to her knees and wept piteously. But in a little time she grew calmer, and then prayed fervently; and at last she rose once more and continued her search, until suddenly, with a great wail of heart-broken pain, she sank down beside a body which she had evidently recognised.

there it was presented with the gauntlet of James to Queen Catherine. Henry VIII. at this time was at the siege of Teruin and special messengers were despatched to him with news of the great victory. From Richmond the King's body was taken to the Monastery of Sheen. In Elizabeth's time the body was mutilated, the head being cut off by a master glazier. He kept it in his house a long time, but finally buried it in the church yard of St. Michael's Wood Street, London.

CHAPTER XXXV

A REVELATION IN THE GLOAMING

The nun stooped low, with that cry of pain, over the body she had found, and she bent her head and placed her ear against the drawn pallid lips to learn if there was any life still remaining. Evidently she thought there was, for she rose suddenly to her feet, and waved her lantern about as a signal, a signal that was understood; for, in the far distance, another lantern was waved in response, and then it advanced quickly, and soon the bearer of it—a monk—came up.

"This man still lives," the nun observed in an agitated voice; "let us bear him to the tent, and endeavour to prevent his life sands from oozing away."

"He is young," the monk replied, as he stooped and placed his hand over the heart.

"And fair," added the nun, somewhat pointedly.

"Truly," said the monk, looking up inquiringly into her face; "and also noble, as proved by his dress and the fact of his being here. For it was here the King made his last stand and around him stood the best blood of Scotland."

"Alas, poor Scotland, wail for your King!" moaned the nun, as she burst into tears, and wept bitterly. "Oh, woe the day that brought this cruel bitterness upon our country," she sobbed out in a burst of passion. Then she fell upon her knees, and covering her face with her hands, she prayed fervently for a few minutes. She

rose suddenly, and turning to her companion, who had been making an examination of the wounded man, she asked—

“Think you, good brother, this fair youth will live?”

“I scarce am able to express even an opinion, sister,” the monk answered cautiously. He is in a perilous state, but youth has strong recuperative powers, and so this one’s time may not yet have come.”

“Let us lose no time, then, but bear him to the tent and your best skill shall be exercised to woo him back to this wicked world.”

“You seem interested in the youth,” the monk remarked.

“I am.”

“You know him, then?”

“Yes.”

“Since when, good sister?”

“Waste not moments that are precious in useless questions,” was the answer. “His blood is flowing away, and delay may be fatal.”

Without another word the monk waved his lanthorn, and soon he was joined by two more brethren with a rough litter. On this the wounded man was placed, and borne quickly to the tent, which was already full of others in similar plight; while outside dozens of gashed and maimed men were stretched on heaps of bracken and heather, and were being attended to by the monks and nuns; and to those for whom the knell of doom had unmistakably sounded, two priests were administering spiritual consolation.

There was something singularly weird and solemn in the whole scene. The white faces of the wounded soldiers were rendered more ghastly by the flickering light of pine torches, which had been stuck into the ground to enable the attendants to see to dress the wounds of their patients. In various parts of the field watch-fires burned, and crowded round them could be distinguished masses of men lying prone upon the

ground. But these were the living soldiers, who, worn out with the many hours of awful work in which they had been engaged, had thrown themselves down on the earth to snatch a brief repose.

Although the battle had ceased, owing to the gathering darkness of night, neither side was quite sure that there would not be a renewal of the struggle with the first glimmering rays of dawning day. But very soon the Scottish commanders came to realize how disastrous the fight had been for them. Their army was decimated; the King was beyond all question of doubt slain, although his body had not yet been discovered, and the nobility of Scotland had suffered a crushing blow. Even the merest tyro in the art of warfare could not fail to understand that Scotland's cause was hopelessly lost, and that it would be criminal folly to renew the fight with the flushed and triumphant victor.

It was a sad and terrible and weary night for hundreds of those beaten but brave men. Comrades, friends, relations were lying dead, and sickening despair seized on the living. Full of high hopes, and confident of success, they had marched from the Borough Moor a hundred thousand strong, and now they were but the shattered remnant of a great army; their royal leader and all the great chiefs slain; and Scotland, their beloved country, the country for which they had fought and bled, was at the mercy of the proud and haughty Henry of England.

The night waned. The wounded man that the nun had brought in from the sanguinary field, and who was on other than Robert de Burgh, had been placed on a bed of heather and bracken inside of the tent, and his rescuer gave him special attention. But he lay for many hours unconscious, for he had received a blow on the head that had slightly fractured the skull, and produced concussion of the brain. The skill of the monks was called into requisition, and they dressed his wound, and gave him such treatment as they deemed necessary.

It is not my purpose here to dwell on the details of the first few days following the one when Flodden's fearful fight spread terror and sorrow and dismay throughout the land beyond the Tweed. The gashed and mangled dead were buried where they lay, and a huge trench was dug into which the bodies of the slain warhorses were thrown. The English in strong force remained for some days in the neighbourhood, but the crushed and broken-hearted Scots turned their footsteps wearily and sadly to their homes.

It had been a rich harvest for Death, and long was the roll of those who had gone down before His sickle. But war's din had now died out, leaving a silence that was painful. Nature herself seemed to be mourning, and the sun had hid its light behind gloomy clouds that threw sombre shadows over the gory field. The very birds of the air held their peace, as if they had been terrified by the roar of the awful struggle. Here and there, hidden by some depression in the earth, or by the rank bracken, a body or two still lay, with blank glaring eyes staring pitifully up to the dark heavens.

The devoted nuns and monks did good work, and they rescued many a soldier who otherwise must have perished from his wounds. At the end of a week the wounded under the care of these good people, were all in a fair way of recovery. Some of the English had been taken away by their comrades, but most of the Scotch who had been unable to go alone yet remained under the charge of the Sisters in the tent in the rear of the battle field, and amongst these was Robert de Burgh. For five days he had lain in a dazed state, and the leech monks feared that he would not recover. With remarkable and unswerving devotion the young nun who had rescued him from the battle field tended and watched him. In the solemn hours of the night she would sit beside him on a rough stool gazing earnestly into his pallid face, and administering to him every now and then, nourishing drink as his lips became

parched. And often she prayed over him silently, turning her tear wet eyes heavenwards in earnest supplication.

It was on the fifth day that he first gave signs of returning consciousness, and fully realised his position, and those around him. He was very feeble from loss of blood, but in a thin, weak voice he asked of a monk who stood near.

"What place is this I am in?"

"A sanctuary for those who suffer, whether from moral or physical hurt."

"You answer well, good brother."

"I fain would hope so," said the monk, crossing his hands in an attitude of devotion.

"I am hurt then?"

"Yes."

"Very gravely?"

"Very gravely."

Robert was silent for a little while; then he asked—

"Shall I live, think you?"

"With heaven's blessing I think you will."

"Ah, heaven's blessing," sighed Robert. "I deserve it not."

"We are all unworthy," the monk replied, "but heaven is very kind."

"Indeed, indeed yes. But tell me, gentle brother, how many days have passed since the fight?"

"We are now in the fifth day."

"Five days, five days," moaned Robert, as if to himself. "And all that time I have lain here, and it has been a blank to me."

"Indeed you have; but your youth will triumph, and you will live, as I honestly believe."

"How many were slain on that awful day?"

"Alas, alas, my son, I know not, but it is a long and terrible list."

"And the King?" asked Robert, breathless with agitation. "He has escaped?"

The monk turned away to weep for a moment, then with broken accents answered—

“Alas, it has pleased heaven that His Grace’s life should close on Flodden Field. Leastway, no tidings of him can be gained.”

Robert covered his eyes with his hand, and for some moments was agitated to tears.

He shuddered with distress as he remembered the sweet Lady Beatrix, and the equally sweet but humbler Alie Duncan. Where were they? And had they thought of him with curses rather than blessings? He had deceived them both, and now in this sad moment he felt that if he could but hear from their lips that they forgave him, he would gladly die; for in his bitterness life seemed little worth having, and it would be better far to end it.

After a long pause, and in an absent way, he murmured—

“And so the King is dead. Alas, poor King! And I his humble and unworthy subject live.” Then turning to the monk, he asked—“Tell me, good brother; how came it about that I was rescued?”

“You were found amongst a heap of slain on the spot where the King made his last heroic stand.”

Robert closed his eyes, and sighed heavily. He seemed to be pondering. Then suddenly he exclaimed—

“Ah, it dawns upon me now. We closed around the King, a solid wall of living men. We fought like lions, but the wall was rent asunder by the furious onslaught of our foe, and its component parts were crushed and shattered.”

“It was an awful fight,” interpolated the monk.

“Awful!” exclaimed Robert. “It was as if hell itself had broken loose. I shudder even now as I think of it. And so you found me there badly wounded?” he added with a weary smile.

“We did.”

“Was I near the King?”

"Indeed, fair sir, I know not, for the dear body of his most honoured Grace has not been found. Some say that he has 'scaped, and fled back to Scotland."

"Nay, by heaven, I will not believe that," cried Robert enthusiastically. "The King fled, when those who were dear to him were pouring out their blood like rain, and falling around him like autumn leaves! The King fled! Nay, nay, it is a black lie. The King could die, but he knew not how to turn his back upon his foe."

"He was a noble King," murmured the monk, much agitated.

"He was the best that ever lived," said Robert, and after a pause he asked—"Know you, good brother, if my father went down in that terrific struggle?"

"I know not your father, sweet youth, even as I know not you."

"I in truth am one whom Fate has cursed," moaned Robert.

"Nay; say not so. Fate curses no man."

"Then heaven does."

"My son, speak not irreverently," said the monk, a little sternly.

"Ah, I am sore distressed, and my heart is heavy."

"That may be so, but heaven will give you comfort."

Robert was silent for some little time, and he covered his face with his hand, as if to hide his emotion. At last he said—

"If you know aught of me, you will know that I have cause for sorrow. I am Robert de Burgh."

"Then you are the son of a noble man," the monk returned.

"You knew my father then?" Robert asked quickly.

"By repute only. He bore the character of being fearless and upright."

"Ay, in truth he was; and I his son am all unworthy so good a father."

"You are severe upon yourself," said the monk kindly.



"But come, you must repose. And now that we know who you are, we will remove you to your home in a little while. Rest—sleep and renew your strength, for life has as yet touched you lightly, and the years are before you."

Robert made no response; he seemed to be quite overcome with grief. He could not doubt for a moment that his father and the Raven, with the little band of retainers, were amongst the slain. And now, seriously wounded, broken in hopes, and his friends and relations slain, he was lying there like a waif whom the tide of battle had battered and cast up as a wreck.

Grief of a most poignant character agitated him; and he rolled and tossed with feverish restlessness upon his heather couch. Presently a gentle voice said to him—

"You seem sore distressed, fair youth."

"I am tortured," he cried.

"And wherefore so? Is not life sweet?"

He turned, and beheld the nun who had rescued him.

"To some it may be," he answered; "to me it is only torture."

"Youth should ever be hopeful," returned the nun, "and though you mourn the loss of dear friends you must remember that life has still solemn duties for you, and a brave man should never shrink from his duty."

"You speak well and reason well, dear sister," he answered with agitation. "You teach me much; but, alas, you cannot give me back the joyousness of my youth, the freshness of my views, the hopefulness that erstwhile filled me."

"And wherefore should hope be dead or freshness have staled?" the sister remarked softly.

"Ah, you cannot read my heart," he sighed.

"I make a guess, though, that it has not been as true as it might have been."

Robert turned wearily to her, and said with some surprise—

"How guess you that?"

"By many signs."

He laid his hand upon hers, as he remarked—

"You are a woman, and can pity; therefore pity me. I have been mad."

"You have been foolish," she answered quickly.

"In truth, yes; very foolish."

"And you have deceived?"

"Yes, I dare not deny it."

The nun sighed, and, withdrawing her hand from his touch, said—

"To deceive seems to be man's privilege; or, at least, he assumes that it is; but, in the future that lies before you, you must make amends for the wrong you have done in the past."

"Would to heaven that I could," he cried.

"An you would, pray earnestly, heaven will help you."

Duty called her away now, and she left him. He lay there pondering upon her words, and with visions of Lady Beatrix and Alie Duncan before him; and he felt at that moment that the only prayer he could utter was that he might be able to kneel at the feet of both these women, and crave their forgiveness for the wrong he had done them. In a little while he sank to sleep, when he woke again, he found that preparations were being made to remove the wounded, and in his own case, a litter had been provided to convey him to his home at the Eagle's Nest. A monk had been told off to accompany him, and turning to this man he asked—

"Where is the good sister who rescued me?"

"I will summon her?" was the answer.

"Lady, I owe you a heavy debt," Robert said when she appeared; "a debt I can never, never repay. You must add to that debt by going with me to my home, so that you may in person receive the thanks of my aunt and my sister."

"I will go with you," she said quietly, "and will try and nurse you into health again."

Robert pressed her hand as a sign of his gratitude, and soon after he was being borne back to his home.

On his arrival he found mourning and wailing in the Castle, for the news of the disaster at Flodden had reached the inhabitants, and they were sorrowing for their lost friends and relations. His aunt was prostrated and in her bed, but Isobel received him with the most extravagant manifestations of delight, for she had concluded he too was numbered amongst the slain.

Yielding to the pressing request of Isobel and her brother, the nun consented to remain for some days, and soon under their watchful tender care, Robert began rapidly to improve in health.

He had so far recovered now that he was able to be up, and, sitting one evening in the gloaming, the nun entered his room to bring him some cooling drink; unable longer to bear the burden of his secret, he craved her to sit down and listen to his story. This she did patiently, and he told her without reserve how he had deceived Lady Beatrix and Alie Duncan alike. When he had finished, the nun remarked—

“It is a pitiable story, but also a common one. You have it in your power, however, to make reparation. You have never truly loved Lady Beatrix, but your heart has always yearned for Alie.”

“How know you that?” he asked in surprise.

“I infer it from what you yourself have said.” He sighed, but made no answer. “Therefore,” she continued, “you must do Alie Duncan justice, and make her your true and lawful wife.”

“But what of Lady Beatrix?” he asked, in agitation.

“She will survive the blow,” the nun whispered.

“Poor thing,” he murmured. “Is it possible she can forgive me, seeing how cruelly I have deceived her?”

“Yes,” answered the nun decisively.

“How know you that?” he asked, looking at her in surprise.

“I know it because I am Lady Beatrix Thirlstane.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

DEVOTION

In dumb amazement Robert stared at the nun, who had thus declared herself to be the Lady Beatrix. He rubbed his eyes to assure himself that he was not dreaming, and then breathlessly he gasped—

“Is it possible?”

“Yes,” she answered. “You see this cross. You remember how, when you were leaving Holyrood, I gave it to you, and surely you cannot have forgotten the words I then uttered. In the prison of Branksford you returned it to me, knowing not then that I was the owner of it.”

“Then if you are Lady Beatrix, you will have the medallion portrait of my mother,” he exclaimed, still dazed by the suddenness of the revelation, and still inclined to doubt the evidence of his senses.

“Yes, it is here,” and from her bosom she drew forth the medallion, and handed it to him.

“Oh, Lady Beatrix——” he cried.

She interrupted him—

“I am Sister Beatrix,” she murmured.

“Sister, then,” he went on, “how can I ever hope that you will forgive the deep wrong I have done you? Nay, an it is not too late, I swear now that you shall be my dear and honoured wife.”

“Hush,” she returned. “Speak not so. It is now impossible. I am the bride of the Church, and no worldly consideration could induce me to renounce the

solemn vows I have already made, nor refuse to make others to which I am pledged when my probation is over. I dreamed of love once, but the dream soon passed, and you yourself have taught me the hollowness of worldly things."

"But how is it I find you here, and in this character?" he asked.

"I felt that I must be near the King, and, knowing that he would never consent to my joining the Church, I told him not; but, as soon as he had departed, I followed him, and joined the Cistercian nuns at the Priory of Coldstream and vowed to devote myself to the service of God. I travelled with two attendants only, and taking a circuitous route so as to avoid the King's army, I reached Coldstream some days before the Vanguard appeared on the Field of Flodden. I at once made my vows; renounced all my worldly wealth in favour of the Church, and was received into the order as a novice. I found that the Abbots of Inchaffrey and Kilwenny, had by express messengers instructed the Abbess of the Priory to organise a devoted band of the Church's servants male and female to minister to the comfort of the wounded and the dying during the strife.* Amongst that band I prayed to be included in order that I might be near my dear King.

* Both the Abbots here mentioned were in King James's train and both were slain on the battlefield.

The Cistercian Priory referred to continued to flourish up to the time of the Reformation. It stood on a spot a little to the east of the present market place, and even now the gardens of the old priory are easily traceable. In a piece of ground which lies between these gardens and the river was the Priory burial ground. Human remains have frequently been dug up from this slip of ground; and a good many years ago a stone coffin was unearthed. There is a tradition that many nobles who fell on the fatal field of Flodden were interred in this burial ground, the Abbess having organised a staff of attendants for that duty. Besides the Priory there was a small establishment of Cistercian monks. It is hardly likely that either the monks or nuns would remain inactive while such stirring scenes were being enacted close to their doors. The hill of Flodden on which King James encamped is only six miles from where the Priory stood, and the spot where the King and his retinue fell fighting, is under three miles. The spot is marked by a tall stone.

"And the King remained in ignorance of all this?"

"Yes."

"And know you aught of his whereabouts now?"

"I know that he has gone to a better world."

"Have you seen his body that you speak with such certainty?"

"Alas, no. I searched the battlefield for hours, but all in vain, though in looking for my King I found my false lover."

"Remind me not of that," he said in broken accents.

"I speak not reproachfully," she returned, as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I can look now with complacency on the past, in which I have enjoyed some glimpses of happiness, but I have also known much sorrow. I have now entered the sphere that is most congenial to my tastes, and, as a devoted daughter of the Church, I give all my thoughts to it. I have no longer anything to do with the world, save in so far as I can try to give comfort to my fellow beings."

"You are an angel," he cried with enthusiasm.

"No, I am only a woman, and a very humble one," she answered.

"Would to heaven the world were filled with women like you," he returned. Then looking at her with revived feelings of admiration he cried passionately—"Oh, Beatrix, as I think of the past it seems to me that I must have been mad not to have learnt the incomparable grandeur of your character. But now the mists have rolled away from my eyes, and I behold you in all your splendour of thought and feeling. The purity of your nature is like unto that of the diamond; and though I am all conscious of my utter unworthiness, yet humbly I pray you to take pity upon me and be my wife."

"I have already told you, Robert, that that is impossible. I have vowed the vow of chastity, the first vow a woman takes when she devotes herself to the church, and I could not break it. But you know not

your own mind at present. Your heart has never belonged to me. You were infatuated, but you did not love."

He bowed his head with shame, and felt confused and abashed. Then in low tones he said—

"Heap your reproaches upon me. I deserve them. I am not worthy to touch the hem of your robe. But since I have lost you I vow that no other woman——"

"Cease," she cried quickly, and stopping him in his speech. "You owe a duty to another woman, a duty to yourself, a duty to heaven; therefore make no rash vows."

"That other woman of whom you speak may be dead and I must atone for the past. Therefore, when my health has returned I will make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and when I come back I will enter the Church, in order that I may, at least, be near you."

"An you knew that she to whom you allude were dead your resolve would be good, and I would recommend you to carry it out, but you taught that woman to love you, and she lives."

"Lives?"

"Yes."

"How know you that?"

"I speak with certainty. Your heart is hers. You gave it to her, and you know it. Therefore you must not be false to yourself."

"Alas, I *have* been false to myself," he observed sadly.

"True," she said, "you have been false in the past, but you need not be so in the future."

He was greatly overcome by the surging emotion that agitated him, and he could not yet bring himself to believe that he was not quite free from delusion. It seemed so strange that this lady whom he had once professed to love should be sitting there now in the character of his nurse, and occupying a position which rendered it morally impossible that she could ever marry. It was a sense of this impossibility that so confused him and cast him down. All the old infatua-

tion that had held him in times past when he was in her presence, came upon him again now as he looked upon her exquisitely beautiful face, from which not even her sombre and unpicturesque dress could detract one iota. On the contrary, it rather seemed to bring it into greater prominence, as a beam of sunlight on a pathway is thrown into greater prominence by surrounding shadows. But beautiful as her face was, there was something in it that made one feel sad. It was such a pensive face, the clear white skin—skin that was as a lily's leaf, upon which the rose blush had settled, the large dreamy eyes, the thin nostrils, and the snow-white temples with their blue veins, all told of a fragile, delicate constitution that was destined to break up early. In fact, even then, as must have been apparent to a keen observer, death was stealing gently over that frail flower.

Lady Beatrix had always been a delicate woman, in whom the breath of life had been kept by great care and attention. But the hardships she had suffered recently, the coarse fare, the privations, the unusual exertions, and more than all the shock she had suffered by the horrors she had been forced to witness, had told upon her, and made insidious inroads on her fragile constitution.

Robert de Burgh, however, saw not this. He saw only the woman as he had seen her less than a year ago, on that ever memorable night at Linlithgow Palace, when she was a star amongst stars; the most beautiful amongst all the beauty there. And he also saw now what he did not see then, and that was the beauty of her mind; the exquisite sweetness of her disposition. If ever there was a woman upon whom gentleness and all that was perfect in woman had set its mint mark, that woman was Lady Beatrix Thirlstane.

Robert gazed upon her, lost in admiration, and at last led away by his feelings, and forgetting all that she had said to him within the last half-hour, he cried—

"Beatrix, Beatrix, you must give me your love; you must be my wife, or I shall die."

His words seemed to greatly distress and agitate her, and she looked at him with reproachful eyes.

"Ah Robert de Burgh," she sighed, "why do you thus play traitor to yourself? Respect my mission, I crave you and from this moment, and forever cease to think of me in any other light than that of a true friend who devotedly wishes you happiness and true joy."

Robert was greatly overcome. Her manner and voice had deeply impressed him. She had spoken like one who was inspired, and he was moved as he had never before been moved in all his life; and, leaning back in the seat he occupied, he covered his eyes with his hand.

The gloaming had faded, and night had come—night that was made beautiful by the full moon, which, shining through the latticed window, filled the room with a ghostly light. Taking advantage of his pre-occupied state of mind, Beatrix rose, and moved silently as a shadow from the chamber. And when at last his agitation had calmed, and he would have made response to her, he found that he was alone.

He felt then that it was better so, for what could he have said. He knew only too well how irrefutable were her statements. He had never truly loved her, but he had been infatuated.

In a little while, being fatigued and weak, he summoned his servant, and retired for the night; and the next morning he learned from his sister that Beatrix had taken her departure, but had promised to return in a few days. He was surprised that she had thus gone away without even acquainting him with her intention to go. But she had promised to return, and he knew that a promise from her was sacred.

And so the days wore on, and the heavy shadow of sorrow that hung over the Eagle's Nest did not lift, for the lingering hope that had been cherished that the fortune of war might have spared the master of the

house died down, as the lapse of time only served to prove the certainty of his having perished. And every day as fresh tidings of the battle came, they confirmed too certainly that "the Flowers of the Forest were a' wede awa'," and Scotland was crushed.

Robert de Burgh now grew rapidly strong again, and his wound was almost quite healed. A week passed and Beatrix had not returned. The eighth day came and went, but still she was absent. Then he began to fear that something had befallen her. Two days later, however, it was announced to him that Sister Beatrix had returned. He heard this with undisguised pleasure, and he sent a message praying her to see him without delay. She did not come, however, for fully an hour.

"Ah, how long you have tarried," he exclaimed joyfully, as she entered his room. "I have wearied for you, and had you not come soon I intended to seek you."

"And wherefore so?" she asked, in some surprise, and paused for his answer.

"I know not," was all he could stammer.

"In truth you do not," she answered, with reproach in her tone. "You are a foolish man, I had almost said a weak one. Between you and me is a barrier that can never be broken down, and you have no right to seek me, nor even to think of me, excepting as you might think of your sister. I have been detained unexpectedly and against my will; and I have come back now at considerable inconvenience. But I had a duty to perform, a mission to fulfil, and when I have done that you and I must part for ever."

"Part for ever?" he echoed.

"Yes. I am going to Rome."

"To Rome," he repeated, as if he were confused.

"To Rome," she answered, "where duty calls me, duty to the Church of which I am so humble and unworthy a member. But let us turn to another subject I see that you are strong now."

"Yes, I am all but well."

"And have you thought of what you are going to do in the future?"

"No."

"Have you thought at all of her whom you love?"

"Of her whom I love," he exclaimed in blank amazement.

"Even so."

"To whom do you refer?"

"Robert de Burgh, again I ask you why you are so false to your own instincts? Whom else should I mean but Alie Duncan?"

The blood leapt into his face, and his heart quickened its beatings.

"How know you that I love Alie Duncan?" he asked quickly.

"You have asked that before," she said. "How do I know that the stars give light, and that the sun is warm if it is not by the evidence of my senses. And by the same evidence do I know that you love Alie; know that you loved her even when you talked loudest of love to me."

"But Alie Duncan may be dead for aught I know," he stammered in embarrassment.

"For aught you know, she may be." She rose, and going to the door opened it, and called to some one, and in another moment she returned leading Reuben Godstone, the page, into the room.

"This page can give you some information of Alie Duncan," she said.

Reuben's face was very red, and he stood with downcast head. Robert was bewildered, and looked from one to the other as if for information, but neither spoke. At last he cried—

"What does this mean?"

"It means," said Beatrix, "that I have brought Reuben Godstone to speak to you in the name of Alie Duncan."

"What know you of Alie Duncan?" he asked.

sharply, and speaking like a man who was still utterly confused.

"I know that she loves you," Reuben answered in very low tones, and keeping his eyes bent upon the floor.

"*You* know that she loves me?" Robert cried. "How do *you* know that?"

"Because I *am* Alie Duncan," was the answer.

Robert clapped his hand to his forehead, and fairly staggered.

"You—Alie—Duncan!" he gasped. "Impossible."

"And wherefore impossible?" put in Beatrix. "In the garb of the nun do I not disguise the Court lady, Beatrix Thirlstane, and in that page's costume you behold your true love. Yearning to be near you, she donned this disguise, and went with your father to the war. She released you from the prison of Braxxston, and during the fight that followed she was slightly wounded. She came under my care, and then it was I discovered that the page boy was of the feminine sex. Following that discovery she told me her story, and when she recovered I placed her under the care of some sisters of my Order. Her father is dead, and one only of her brothers survives, therefore she has a right to claim your protection. She has risked everything for you; she loves you and you love her; and as your honoured and lawful wife she must share your joys and sorrow."

Beatrix took Alie's hand and placed it in Robert's. For a moment they stood as if bewildered. Then, stirred by a sudden impulse, he drew her to him, and with a little cry she let her head fall upon his breast, and he locked her in his arms.

Had Robert noticed Beatrix's face at that moment he might have observed that there came into it an expression of infinite pain. It was a tremendous struggle for a woman, who had loved as she had loved, to wrench that love from her heart with pitiless hand, and to see

another take the place she should have occupied. But she was moved by a grand feeling of duty, and her utter unselfishness enabled her to make the sacrifice. The King had been to her a hero, at whose feet she had sat and worshipped. He was gone, and a void that nothing could fill was left in her life; now the last link that bound her to worldly things she had shattered, and she had nothing to sustain her save her devotion to the cause she had espoused. On that and to that she would devote all her energies, and in the folds of the Church she would find rest and peace from the passionate world that roared around.

She stood for a moment pensive and contemplative, and with her large, liquid eyes bent upon the lovers, who, locked in a fond embrace, were too absorbed to notice aught else. Then with a silent movement she glided from the room, and closed the door behind her without a sound.

It was some moments before Robert came to a sense of his surroundings, and as he held Alie off from him at arm's length he looked into her face, and exclaimed, with enthusiasm—

“Alie, my beloved, you are more beautiful than ever.”

She sighed her answer, and twining her arms about his neck laid her cheek against his shoulder. There was silence again for some minutes, until at last he led her to a seat and threw himself at her feet, and gazing up to her with admiration, said—

“And you have done all this for me?”

“All for you,” she answered tenderly. “My father died, and my brothers were embittered against me. I knew that they were going to the war, and they insisted that I should stay with Jean Laing, but I was aware that she hated me, and I felt that I would rather die a hundred deaths than suffer her persecutions. Besides, my heart was following you. I knew not where you were, but my faith in you never faltered. You had taught me to love you. You had pledged me your

honour to make me your lawful wife, and never once did I believe that you would fail me. I determined, therefore, to try and learn something of your whereabouts, and so, escaping from my brothers, I fled to Edinburgh, where I purchased this disguise. In Edinburgh I could get no tidings of you, and I came to your father's Castle as a page. I went with your father to the war, and when I saw you I was happy. It was I who whispered in your ear, "Strike hard and sure for Alie's sake," when you fought with Malcolm Laing. When I lay wounded and ill in the nun's tent Sister Beatrix discovered my sex, and to her I told my story. Now I have you here. Is it a dream, and shall I awake soon to find that I am only the victim of a cruel delusion?"

"It is no dream," he cried, springing from his knees, and throwing his arms around her neck. "It is a great reality. I am yours; yours for all time, and on earth death only shall separate us. I see clearly enough now. I have been blind, but the scales have fallen from my eyes. I have sinned and erred but my sins and errors have been chiefly those of youth. Through sorrow and affliction I have been chastened, and henceforth, with God's blessing I will endeavour to so order my life that I may atone in the future for what I have done in the past.

She was very happy in that supreme moment. It was a full reward to her for all she had suffered; and drooping her head on his shoulder, she wept tears of joy.

At last Robert awoke to a sense of his surroundings.

"You must change this costume for one more fitted to your sex and my affianced wife," he said, and he led her to his sister, who received her kindly, and for Robert's sake displayed sisterly affection. He then made inquiries about Beatrix, and learned with pain and deep sorrow that she had gone away, but she had left a letter for him. It contained only these few lines:—

"MY BROTHER,—I have restored to you the woman you love, and my duty so far has ended. As your wife you must cherish and guard her, and she will faithfully repay you with devotion. You and I will never meet again on earth, and so I say farewell. Be true to yourself, be true to her who holds your heart, and think of me only as one who has passed away from the strife of bitterness, and found that peace and joy which flows from a source that is not earthly. "BEATRIX."

Robert did not read this without a keen pang of sorrow, but he knew that he could not alter the determination Beatrix had come to. She had proved herself to be endowed with qualities of such an ennobling character, that he could only think of her as one whom heaven had touched with sublimity, and to follow her example of faithfulness, truth, charity, and unselfishness would be his earnest and constant aim.

* * * * *
The weeks rolled away, and stretched into months. The dark shadow of Flodden Field still hovered over Scotland, and the wail of sorrow still made itself heard. Desolation had come to thousands of homes, and many a hearth had grown cold. Fathers and husbands, brothers and friends, kith and kin had poured out their life blood in the King's cause, and their bones now mouldered where the fearful struggle had taken place. The gaps their loss had made could never be filled, and a generation would have to pass before the pang of pain which the living suffered would cease.

The blow had fallen especially heavy on the Eagle's Nest, for Sir Hugh de Burgh, the gallant Raven, and nearly all the retainers had been slain on that day of slaughter. At length, after some opposition from his aunt, Robert de Burgh made Alie Duncan his wife. The good lady's sense of the proprieties was so shocked at what she was pleased to consider this mesalliance, that she betook herself with her poodle and her page to some relations in the north.

Robert was not sorry that she had gone, for he felt that she would ever have been an element of strife in his domestic circle. His sister remained devoted to him, and as the master of the Eagle's Nest, and the husband of his dearly-loved Alie, he turned his attention to the cultivation of the arts of peace. The once stern stronghold he deprived of its warlike character, and its name soon became synonymous with hospitality throughout the country. Children came to bless his union, and in Alie he found a loving helpmate, a true woman, a devoted wife.

Two years later he learned from an emissary who had just come from Rome that Sister Beatrix had died peacefully soon after her arrival there. Robert heard this news with unfeigned sorrow, and in loving regard for the memory of a woman whose character was sublime, he and his wife erected a small chapel, in which they placed a marble slab, and on it in golden letters they recorded her name and virtues.

THE END.



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